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THE SHAPE OF KNOWLEDGE:

THE POSTWAR AMERICAN POET'S LIBRARY,

WITH DIANE DI PRIMA AND CHARLES OLSON

by

MARY CATHERINE KINNIBURGH

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2019

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The Postwar American Poet's Library with Diane di Prima and Charles Olson

by

Mary Catherine Kinniburgh

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

The Shape of Knowledge:
The Postwar American Poet's Library with Diane di Prima and Charles Olson

by

Mary Catherine Kinniburgh

ADVISOR: Ammiel Alcalay

On the shelves of any collection of books, or what we might deem "a library," is material evidence that generates multiple vectors of meaning. After D. F. McKenzie's "sociology of the text," our ability to *read* books requires that we not just know their contents, but understand the networks in which they are built, distributed, interpreted, and used. In this capacity, books are a prime way of answering a political and epistemological question: how does knowledge take material form? And how is this process politically shaped at different points in time, by the types of knowledge that are privileged, siloed, distributed, or silenced?

This dissertation asks this question through the eyes of two key knowledge-seeking poets in post-1945 American poetry: Diane di Prima and Charles Olson. Writing during the height of the Cold War, and later Vietnam, Olson and di Prima were intimately familiar with the restrictive approach applied to knowledge in the mid-twentieth century (the former investigated, the latter arrested, by the FBI). Since both of their poetic practices involved extensive historical research, covering Mayan glyphs, pre-Christian Western ritual, the history of America, and alchemy, Olson and di Prima understood the precarity of what knowledge takes material, discoverable form—if it ever does. Writing alongside Amiri Baraka, Muriel Rukeyser, Ed Sanders, and other poets in this era (whose *Blues People*, *Willard Gibbs*, and *Investigative Poetry* demonstrate intuitive research and recovery practices), Olson and di Prima make vivid the truth that building and keeping books is a political act.

Not just the idea of knowledge—newly "disembodied" in Cold War America, thanks to models of information theory—but its specific material conditions are essential to Olson and di Prima. Both poets invested heavily in *form* as a key concept in their poetics: Olson, through the groundbreaking "Projective Verse," and Diane di Prima, with her dedication to representing embodied experience with its mysteries undiminished. Both Olson and di Prima are prolific book collectors, and at times cataloguers, impromptu archivists, and assemblers of their own extensive libraries. Their devotion to knowledge-seeking as an embodied practice that happens in libraries, archives, museums, and cities—beyond the narrow realms of academic-meaning making that they both rejected—shows how poets, working outside of formal institutions, structured the very shape of knowledge as they collected it in post-1945 America.

Among numerous archival documents and collections, two important non-institutional resources address these critical features of Olson and di Prima's work. The first, the Maud/Olson Library in Gloucester, Massachusetts, contains a copy of every book Olson was ever thought to have read, collected by scholar Ralph Maud with annotated bookplates. The second is Diane di Prima's "occult library," a collection of books that dates back to the 1960s that she envisions as a specific act of archival preservation and as a working resource. Alongside the context of these libraries, di Prima's understudied role as a printer and publisher, especially around the era of *Revolutionary Letters* in the 1960s and 1970s, offers greater insight into how di Prima in particular addresses the importance of securing knowledge in material form by taking matters into her own hands. Together, these objects of study offer a perspective on libraries, archives, and books that is fully articulated by *poets*—a key perspective against the larger backdrop of institutions, professional organizations, and dealers that now shape the world of special collections.

By exploring these specific case studies—the Maud/Olson Library, Diane di Prima's occult library, and Diane di Prima's work as a publisher in her work *Revolutionary Letters*—this dissertation

establishes three main arguments. Firstly, libraries that belong to poets are significant archival and conceptual units, which require specific institutional and scholarly approaches in order to be legible and indeed preserved. Secondly, that understanding these libraries as projects of how poets structure knowledge in postwar America offers us new insights into the question of the "postmodern," or information overload from an archival perspective. And thirdly, that Diane di Prima's work warrants far more extensive critical study for her work at the intersection of multiple identities that make knowledge material: publisher, book collector, and indeed, alchemist. For the evidence of these claims, I turn now to the books themselves.

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First and foremost: this project would not exist were it not for Diane di Prima, a poet, publisher, mother, and medium for poetry's history. Both di Prima and her partner, Sheppard Powell, were generous in manifold ways—allowing me to work in their home and visit Diane, allowing me to examine their library, and memorably, teaching me the uses of protective crystals. My experience with Diane and Shep left me changed. Thank you both.

The staff and steering committee of the Maud/Olson Library, especially Henry Ferrini, André Spears, Gregor Gibson, and Judith Nast, welcomed me frequently to the collection and shared their expertise freely. Gloucester now feels like a second home, made all the more special by the history of poets in the community. I send gratitude to Gerrit Lansing, a generous and kind friend, who passed in early 2018.

Few things have proven more important in shaping my work than *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative*, which is responsible for connecting me with the libraries I research in this dissertation and for apprenticing me in the world of archives, publishing, and living literature. *Lost & Found* underwrote four research fellowships for me to visit the Maud/Olson Library in Gloucester, Massachusetts, as well as Diane di Prima's home in San Francisco, California. Working with Kendra Sullivan, Sampson Starkweather, Stephon Lawrence, and the team of the Center for the Humanities is a true pleasure. Likewise, *Lost & Found* connected me with Kate Tarlow Morgan, an indispensable editor and mentor. My love to fellow editor and di Prima scholar, Iris Cushing—our research on the beach at Solstice, in backyards with nasturtiums, and driving around Willits in a loaner pickup truck made this process inimitable.

My thanks also to the Early Research Initiative, who provided a Knickerbocker Award in American Studies to visit California and di Prima. Likewise, gratitude to Graduate Center Digital

Initiatives for their support of my early research with a Provost's Digital Innovation Grant, and to Matthew K. Gold for his mentorship and faith in my work. Thank you to Wayne Koestenbaum, for his willingness to go alchemical with me on the second exams and then join for the dissertation. My gratitude also to Miriam Nichols, who attended my annual meeting and dissertation defense, and offered invaluable suggestions on the manuscript. And thank you to my colleagues and friends at the New York Public Library, including William P. Kelly and Declan D. Kiely, as well as Isaac Gewirtz. I learned from each of you, among the Dickens and Thackeray of the Berg Collection where I worked during the composition of this dissertation.

My respect and gratitude to the librarians, archivists, booksellers, and staff who made my research possible at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, at the University of North Carolina Chapel-Hill, and at the New York Public Library. Enormous thanks to the tireless staff at the Graduate Center Library, especially the Interlibrary Loan Team, who retrieved countless items for me at a speed that seemed to warp the universe. Thanks to Steven Clay of Granary Books and to Elaine Katzenberger, of City Lights Books, for generosity of information and conversation.

Cosmically, this was made possible by Ammiel Alcalay, founding editor of *Lost & Found* and advisor of this dissertation. I can't thank you enough for what you gave me as a person in this work. I am fortunate beyond comprehension to be your student; it's a role I plan to occupy for this lifetime and the next.

Gratitude to my sister, Virginia Kinniburgh, who paved roads of intellectual discovery and friendship. Thanks to the friends, who listened and read.

I dedicate this work to Conley Lowrance.

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The Shape of Knowledge: An Introduction

In 1933, Harvard student Charles Olson attempts to recover Herman Melville's library, which was sold and dispersed across the East Coast after his death. In the process of reassembly, he encounters Melville's annotations of Shakespeare. Olson begins writing a work that later becomes *Call Me Ishmael*, and argues that Melville conceptualized his seminal work, *Moby Dick*, in the margins of *King Lear*.

*

In 1942, poet Muriel Rukeyser writes to scientist Albert Einstein, inquiring whether he might compose a preface to her forthcoming book on Willard Gibbs, the late nineteenth-century scientist who discovered the rule of phase. In her letter, she writes, "I wrote this book because I needed to read it…My work has been in poetry—the poetry of the years just before this war and of the war—and I know what these images mean there." Twelve days later, Einstein writes back to "Miss Ruckeyser" [sic]: "I cannot give my public endorsement to such an undertaking," stating "how hateful and ridiculous it is, when a serious man, absorbed in important endeavours, is ignorantly lionized" through personal biography rather than his research alone.

*

In 1963, LeRoi Jones publishes *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. The book traces the development of African-American culture through music practices, from slavery to present-day jazz and blues. In the new introduction to the 1999 edition, titled "Blues People: Looking Both Ways," Amiri Baraka writes that when he began the book, "he was admittedly and very openly shooting from the hip," though the ideas "were forceful enough to convince me that I did know something" (vii). The book was a watershed and has remained in print since its initial publication.

*

In 1961, Ed Sanders attempts to board a nuclear submarine as an act of protest. He is apprehended by police, and incarcerated in Montville State Jail in Uncasville, Connecticut, for most of August. From his cell, he requests his copy of a book of Egyptian hieroglyphs. The request is denied over concerns of the hieroglyphics constituting Russian code: a significant threat in Cold War America. Denied also his requests for pencils and paper, he proceeds to write "Poem from Jail" on hundreds of feet of toilet paper, studying the hieroglyphs he had drawn on small bits of paper and cigarette packaging.[1]

*

In 1965, the poet Diane di Prima begins studying the early modern alchemist, Paracelsus, after receiving an offer of two hundred dollars to write the introduction to a reprint of A. E. Waite's translations. She reads both volumes straight through. She writes in her 2001 memoir, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, "I didn't guess that Paracelsus would change forever my way of seeing the world" (422-423). That same year, she starts Poets Press, an imprint that goes on to publish Audre Lorde, David Henderson, Timothy Leary, Michael McClure, John Ashbery, and over thirty emerging and established poets. The printer's device is a woodcut from Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* in 1597, an "alchemical logo" of "a dragon eating its tail, flanked by the sun and the moon" (Braun 11, *Recollections* 412).

*

For American poets writing in the decades after World War Two, in an era of rising surveillance and political turmoil, the question of what types of knowledge poets could possess—scientific, literary, embodied, occulted—was politically imperative. Or as Charles Olson states in 'The Gate and the Center," "KNOWLEDGE either goes for the *center* or it's inevitably a State

[1] Cook, Jennifer Seaman. "Still Happening: An Interview with Ed Sanders." *LA Review of Books*. July 18, 2018. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/still-happening-a-conversation-with-ed-sanders/#!. Ed Sanders Archive Description, Granary Books Online. Steven Clay.

Whore—which American and Western education generally is, has been, since its beginning" (*Collected Prose* 168). To counteract this, Olson and his peers sought to write, teach, and work in ways that spoke to this *center*, exploring traditions and systems that pushed against the rising tides of information engineering, specialization of information types into obscurity or inaccessibility, or old-fashioned censorship.

As a result of these practices, the material forms that poetic knowledge does or does not take are also inherently connected to this political history. The evidentiary value of books, archival records, recorded speech, and publishing histories constitute the basis of any possibility of not only preserving, but "reanimat[ing]" the contexts in which they were created" (Alcalay 17). After Paul Ricoeur's idea of the archival "trace"—that there is no reality of history, only fragments that can be used to reconstruct an idea of it—the task of examining *what poetic knowledge takes material form* becomes a matter of urgency to preserve not just the works of poets, but the stores of knowledge they concentrate within their bodies—archival, bibliographic, and even literal.

The way that poets organized knowledge after World War Two was influenced by a variety of factors, which then affected the way that the knowledge took form. The poem as a unit of knowledge, with its own possibilities for organization and structure, was of course key, even though the substrate might vary (as with "Poem from Jail," birthed on bath tissue). Beyond this, poets mimeographed magazines, printed books, performed plays, staged readings—each medium its own genre or structure for shaping and sharing poetic knowledge. However, poets during this era also created their own archives and libraries, media that were newly conceptualized according to "information science," from the launch of the first archival processing manual in Dutch in 1898, and the ever-expanding interest in libraries as democratic institutions in postwar America. To both of these forms, especially the latter, poets structured their collections to inform their poetic practices, but also their lives: what they needed to know in order to survive.

Charles Olson, sifting through bookshops and seller catalogues for Melville's lost volumes, Diane di Prima Xeroxing rare alchemical texts, Ed Sanders requesting a tome of hieroglyphs: books shared rare and precious information for the investigative poet (a la Sanders) or the 'istorian (after Olson) who sought to find out the truth for his or her self. The increased availability of most printed materials in the twentieth century as a result of publishing technologies for both industries and consumers (as in offset printing or mimeograph), alongside increased professional efforts in discoverability (such as cataloging), meant that collecting and finding books in the twentieth century became an accessible practice to a far greater range of people. Markets and communities emerged for rare books, author archives, primary sources—di Prima notes how the Phoenix Book Shop in Greenwich Village kept many poets fed, including Gregory Corso who would stop by, scrawl out a notebook, and sell it to the shop's purveyor, Robert (Bob) Wilson. At the same time, censorship of books pervaded. Di Prima recounts the risks of work in the Phoenix Book Shop, and the environment of paranoia; "at the period, we were in the throes of an insane, obsessive repression of the written word—you could get arrested for selling Henry Miller...*Howl* was on trial, and *The Love Book* by Lenore Kandel" (*Recollections* 216). In a century when more books than ever were being produced and circulated, finding the right kind of book—the book that had been censored or occulted—was more critical than ever.

The significant costs of book production in earlier historical eras limited the type of individual who might consider themselves a book collector, and Paul Raabe notes that reflecting on early librarianship—which he frames as connoisseurship—requires us to understand the history of reading before industrialization as primarily an activity related to the privileges afforded by economic status (283). By the twentieth-century, alongside the growing idea that libraries should be framed as symbols of democracy and public knowledge, technological advancements in printing meant that opportunities to purchase, despite censorship and distribution, or create reference copies of texts

with mimeograph or Xerox, had expanded considerably by the middle of the twentieth century. Against the deeper history of librarianship or book collecting as elite, by the midcentury in America most anyone who needed many books on hand could amass a large library, especially given the dynamic social networks around bookstores such as the Phoenix Book Shop, City Lights, and others. Even in eras of financial difficulties, poets could augment their own libraries with copies from public libraries or books purchased on credit—as Olson's library-stamped editions show, or di Prima's memories of buying as many books as possible on student credit before skipping Swarthmore.

Thus, we have a historically-specific collector's unit: the "poet's library," or simply, a library collected by a poet. Either as a physical collection or as a bibliography that cites disparate or now-destroyed objects, the "poet's library" occurs across historical eras and geographic regions with the advent of print. In Western European culture, the libraries collected by poets—studied examples include Ben Jonson and Samuel Coleridge, among many others, provide insights into the contemporaneous book trade for private libraries, but also larger political questions of accumulating knowledge in material form. For instance, Ralph J. Coffman's work on Coleridge suggests that by reconstructing the poet's working library, we might better understand "the tension between the democratization of the printed word and the persistence of the elitist constraints on access to information in nineteenth-century England" (277). Likewise, applying this methodology to twentieth-century American book collecting reveals specific considerations between restricted and free-flowing forms of knowledge in print, and also, significantly, changes in the type of poet who could collect a library. Poets with little income, transient housing, and no university affiliation or government resources often amassed important collections that they described conceptually, used regularly, and considered as part of their poetic practice. Some of these poets wrote extensive bibliographies as part of their poetry and pedagogy, expanding our concept of what their libraries

may have actually contained. Given these qualities, poets' libraries in the latter half of the twentieth century are often incomplete and permeable, but potent portraits of their collectors.

So, where do we find a poet's library? Despite the rapid acceleration of the literary papers market in the twentieth century, with author archives capable of fetching upwards of a million dollars, personal libraries are often not included in seller inventories or ultimately the acquisition itself. There are a few important exceptions to this, speaking specifically of the generation of authors writing after World War Two: Kathy Acker's library, housed in its own reading room at the University of Cologne, or Kenneth Rexroth's library at the Kanda University of International Studies in Japan. These successes—notably *not* housed on United States soil—speak to the possibilities of these types of collections and reading rooms, as well as the work to be done for collections that have yet to be placed. The challenges are numerous; institutions often have limited resources for storing and cataloging author libraries as specific units, even though an author may conceive of their library as a conceptual project, or as an archive in and of itself. Without documentation of the unique materiality of these books—such as autograph annotations—they are at risk for being returned to the author or estate, deaccessioned, or redistributed to general collections without readily-visible attribution to their provenance. And likewise, without documentation of the importance of the books as evidence of the author's practices or as part of a conceptual project, scholars have little other option than to take annotation as a book-by-book phenomenon. In each instance—scholarly and institutional—the book becomes the unit of analysis, rather than the library.

The question of book-as-unit appears early in the twentieth century in relation to the emerging field of information science, as part of discussions on what would later become informally known as "information overload." Brooks Adams' *The New Empire* (1902), a formative text for both Charles Olson and Amiri Baraka, grapples with the growing influence of scientific industry upon

American political influence as well as what Baraka calls the "complete domination" of the "economic sensibility" as part of hostility towards artistic and creative life in American culture (*Blues People* 230). Adams focuses intently on books as physical and conceptual units, arguing that the overemphasis on books within libraries as a fundamental unit of knowledge limits our ability to synthesize and derive meaningful knowledge from ever-increasing bibliographies. Adams compares books to facts, noting that "what gives facts value is their relation to each other; for when enough have been collected to suggest a sequence of cause and effect, a generalization can be made which scientific men call a "law"" (xviii). And while the idea of knowledge organized by "scientific" reasoning is particularly charged in the early twentieth century, Adams' insistence that "no attempt has been made to digest what has been gathered," and "libraries are no longer able to buy and catalog the volumes which appear, and he who would read intelligently must first learn to eliminate" speaks to a problem we might now characterize as postmodern (xviii).[2]

Poets' libraries, then, have much to teach us: how poets attempted to manage an ever-expanding universe of information against barriers of censorship, access, and discovery, as well as what they managed to keep, had to give up, or otherwise chose to preserve. Together, these practices allow us to inch closer towards understanding their *poetics*: not just the poems themselves but their cosmological context in the life of the poet. During her time teaching at the New College

[2] Adams was not the only scholar of knowledge who argued (and indeed, had hope) for the idea of a "complete" library that meaningfully house all that could be known. Frederick Kilgour, an American librarian who pioneered the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), illustrates multiple times in *The Evolution of the Book* (1998) moments where library databases, which are notoriously specific to institutions, with a variety of standards for cataloging and description, could have merged to form a single descriptive language and database. His contribution with OCLC, whose database is now called WorldCat, is the largest open public access catalog (OPAC) in the world, which enumerates any registered book in its database that encompasses thousands of worldwide libraries. Digitally, rather than physically, this system starts to make good on Adams' wish. Still: the question of "completeness," not to mention how to meaningfully process an ever-expanding array of information, remains.

of California in San Francisco, where Diane di Prima taught as core faculty in the Poetics Program from 1980 to 1987, she recounts a class visit from Robert Duncan:

> Toward the end of the class there was a general discussion, and I don't know what came up, but he said 'I don't want to see the whole picture, I just want to see my little piece that I have to work on, and just work on that little piece, I don't want to see the whole thing.' And I said, 'I want to know, I want to know it all, even if I never pick up a pen again.' (Hadbawnik)

The desire of "I want to know it all," and the risk she is willing to take for this principle, appears in di Prima's poetry and her occult library, both storehouses of knowledge, lifetimes in the making. Likewise, Charles Olson might agree, advocating for "a saturation job" to know all there is to know about any given subject, as he tells Ed Dorn at Black Mountain College, a work later published as *A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn*, or in his sprawling "A Plan for a Curriculum for the Soul" with over two-hundred need-to-know terms—or even his own chaotic and permeable library. To add to this intensity, both Olson and di Prima had a knack for book cataloging and archival work; di Prima worked in bookstores during much of her time in New York City, where she "usually wound up doing the cataloguing…making sense of things, making order out of interminable piles of ancient texts," and Olson at one point assisted in the brokering of some D. H. Lawrence papers to the Library of Congress (*Recollections* 214).

In the era of "Projective Verse," which considers embodiment a crucial aspect of poetry, books are not just a means to an end of obtaining knowledge, but material and embodied sites that become newly animated by their readers. Both Olson and di Prima share poetic manifestos that tackle the question of form; Charles Olson's "Projective Verse," which now-famously states that

form must follow content in a poem, proved extraordinarily influential for a generation of New American poets in linking the body, breath, and written word. Diane di Prima enumerates her poetics in her memoir of her early years in New York City, titled *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*: "THE REQUIREMENTS OF OUR LIFE IS THE FORM OF OUR ART." She clarifies that "our" refers to women in particular, and that requirements, a singular entity, might manifest as "the writing of modular poems, that could be dropped and picked up, the learning to sketch when you used to work in oils," no doubt influenced by di Prima's years as a mother of eventually five young children during the height of her involvement in the Beat and counterculture poetry scenes (*Recollections* 226).[3] If Olson's radical contribution to postwar poetics was that poetry is created in the body of the poet, through listening and accessing "where breath has its beginnings" (*Collected* 249), di Prima boldly makes good on Olson's idea that "projective involves a stance toward reality outside the poem": that is, THE REQUIREMENTS OF OUR LIFE as the basis for the FORM OF OUR ART (*Collected* 246). Or, as she states in *Revolutionary Letters*, "Revolutionary Letter #1": "I have just realized the stakes are myself." Form, thus, is not a philosophical question for these poets, but rather an immediate matter for survival. Robert Duncan, paraphrased by Ammiel Alcalay, states, "I have no recourse to taste" when "the work of Olson, Levertov, and others 'belongs not to my appreciations but to my immediate concerns in living'" (43). To drive this home, from di Prima: "in terms of direct influence…I'd say that Robert Duncan and Charles Olson were it, and are still" (Alcalay 157). Together, these three poets demand that we consider poetry and its requirements in the world, not as abstractions or literary "taste" but as a political and embodied imperative.

Together, given their revolutionary approaches to form, Olson and di Prima constitute a critical nexus on the question of how we might negotiate the material traces of the shape of poetic

[3] To this, she adds "ART IS MAGIC," after Michael Goldberg, a painter who was friends with Frank O'Hara.

knowledge after World War Two, with regard to the conceptual and archival implications of this process. Not necessarily as examples of the era, but icons of the challenges and possibilities it afforded, two unique libraries exist today that are both outside of institutional affiliation and relate to these poets. In terms of Olson, the Maud/Olson Library in Gloucester, Massachusetts, is part conceptual art project, part scholarly resource, and part Olson archive: the scholar Ralph Maud collected every book that Olson was ever thought to have owned, or even read. Published as Issue #64, #65, #66 of *The Minutes of the Charles Olson Society* in 2010, the inventory was titled "Catalogue of the Ralph Maud Collection of Charles Olson's Books." Upon Maud's death in 2014, the library was packed up by friends and driven to Gloucester, where the books currently overlook the harbor. Its funding is not indefinite, and its future is unknown. As for di Prima, hundreds of volumes of what she describes as her occult library, a rhizomatic collection of books gathered since the 1960s, sits in her garage. She and her partner, Sheppard Powell, want to keep the books together as a unit, a la Brooks Adams' formulation of knowledge across the physical unit of books, but there are no provisions to do so at this time—in part, because she is still using and creating the collection.

Charles Olson and Diane di Prima

The purpose of this dissertation is to frame the postwar American poet's library as a critical archival unit *because* it is a conceptual unit, and to place the Maud/Olson Library and Diane di Prima's occult library in conversation. I seek to understand their material qualities, the types of history they reflect, and the ways that they connect to the poetic projects of their makers. The choice of these two libraries is in part out of necessity, given their current need for long-term preservation strategies. This choice is also an answer to our historical need to place Charles Olson and Diane di Prima side by side—as they very much were during their shared time on this planet. Of course, the two poets were twenty-four years apart—Olson was born in 1910 and di Prima in 1934—and their

lives took very different trajectories. Olson was educated at Wesleyan and Harvard, nearly completing a Ph.D. in the prestigious and brand-new American Civilizations program at the latter, and then went on to work at high levels in the United States government and Democratic Party before resigning in 1944 and commencing visits with Ezra Pound at St. Elizabeth's. Diane di Prima describes her upbringing as middle class in an Italian-American neighborhood in Brooklyn, dropped out of Swarthmore after her first year, and was living alone in Manhattan by the age of 19, working in the labs at Columbia University and as an art model before becoming a well-known small press publisher, editor, and poet known across coasts.

By her twenties, di Prima began editing and printing *The Floating Bear* with LeRoi Jones, beginning in 1961 and continuing with thirty-eight issues until 1971. This mimeograph journal was first mailed to a list of approximately two hundred poets, and by the late 1960s was printing roughly two thousand copies per issue. The velocity of this journal was unprecedented—sixteen issues were published and distributed in the first year alone—and the *Bear* served as a proofing ground for emerging poetry, away from the conformity and oversight of traditional publishers and journals. In this capacity, it captured the energy of poets working outside of academic, institutional, and genre-based categories. Through the *Bear,* di Prima was a frequent publisher of Olson's work, a role he highly valued; she published "two short *Maximus* poems" of his in the very first issue (di Prima, "Old Father, Old Artificer" 6). In the introduction to the complete published *The Floating Bear*, by Laurence McGilvery in 1973, di Prima notes,

> ...the last time I saw Charles Olson in Gloucester, one of things he talked about was how valuable the Bear had been to him in its early years because of the fact he could get new work out that fast. He was very involved in speed, in communication. We got manuscripts from him pretty regularly in the early days of the Bear, and we'd

> usually get them into the very next issue. That meant his work, his thoughts, would be in the hands of a few hundred writers within two or three weeks. It was like writing a letter to a bunch of friends. (x)

Here, di Prima occupies an essential role in Charles Olson's poetic practice—not just publishing his work but sharing it at a speed and scale that hitherto in American poetry had not existed. With the *Bear*, Olson could afford experimentality with his work, could check its pulse almost immediately given the *Bear*'s publication schedule, and know that the type of reader the *Bear* mailed to—John Wieners, Robert Creeley, name almost anyone writing poetry in the Black Mountain College, San Francisco Renaissance, the downtown New York scene—would be hungry for the work.

Olson's frequent submissions to *The Floating Bear* gave di Prima more than just a passing editorial familiarity with his work. As typesetter and printer of the *Bear*, di Prima typed up all the issues for mimeographing, at which point friends and apartment visitors would pitch in with collating, stapling, addressing, and stamping. Speaking with David Hadbawnik about how her own poetry was influenced by the community that coalesced around *The Floating Bear* and other projects in the 1960s, di Prima notes that other than Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading*, typing poems for the *Bear* was one of the most influential learning experiences for her as a writer.

> The place where I learned the most about poetics, was actually typing those poems for the *Floating Bear*, onto those green stencils….By the time you start, since the *Bear* was the same size as a typewriter page, once you copy exactly the line breaks and the spacing that Olson had done, it gave you plenty of time to absorb it and to ponder why did he do it that way. (Hadbawnik)

Di Prima's careful copying of Olson's work for *The Floating Bear* reveals a unique interaction between the poets, since few activities are as intimate as copying another's poems, particularly those as spatially distinct as Olson's. Di Prima marks this close attention as a formative study for her own work, not just in her copying of Olson's materials for the *Bear* but also in the dozens of other poets she published. This type of attentiveness is a conversation between two poets, ephemerally occurring in the space between the page and the typist.

During the Beloit lectures, Olson explores the word "typos" from a printer's perspective, describing moveable type and notes:

> really, to imagine a printer doing it...he's under your words in order to make the letters of them. Which always delights me, literally, as a problem of creation. In fact, literally, I would go so far—if you will excuse my Americanism—to think that you write that way. That you write as though you were *underneath* the letters… (*Charles Olson: Poetry and Truth* 42-43)

For Olson's work, di Prima is "under [the] words," reading carefully, learning. In Olson's own formulation, he's writing in that manner too—up underneath his own letters, composing. One imagines Olson's pieces in *The Floating Bear*, with di Prima and Olson both beneath the print, holding up the piece as we read, as if on the other side of a space-time dimension.

While firmly connected in *The Floating Bear*, di Prima and Olson's lives intersected before and after. Publishing histories and biographical details reveal the dimensions of this: Charles Olson first published "Projective Verse" in 1950, while Diane di Prima was writing poetry at Hunter High School, conspiring with classmates including Audre Lorde. Eight years later, di Prima published her first book of poetry, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards*, in 1958 as the first publication of Totem Press,

run by LeRoi Jones and printed with an introduction by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the founder of City Lights (*A Secret Location* 90). The next year, Totem Press would publish Olson's *Projective Verse* with a cover by Matsumi Kanemitsu. The densely interconnected small press world of the 1960s meant that Olson and di Prima would share publishers, moments in Gloucester (the poet Gerrit Lansing hosted di Prima for numerous stays, including di Prima's three visits in 1966, 1967, and 1968), and even similar experiences in their poetic initiations, such as pilgrimages to Ezra Pound ("Old Father, Old Artificer" 2).

Even among these historical details, di Prima's relationship with Charles Olson is best characterized in her own words. In 1985, Diane di Prima gave the Charles Olson Memorial Lecture at the University of Buffalo, a lecture series established by Robert Creeley to honor the poet's memory after his passing in 1970. Published as "Old Father, Old Artificer:" Charles Olson Memorial Lecture" by *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative* in 2012, her lectures reveal "her vast knowledge of structure and form to clarify what Olson's actual poetic legacy and accomplishment might be boiled down to...in an alchemical sense, toward a perfection of the elements of composition" ("Old Father, Old Artificer" 3). Her lecture shares numerous intimate reflections, such as holding a benefit for Olson upon hearing his electricity in Fort Square was going to be turned off, how he treated her work as a poet with seriousness and respect despite her misgivings about her craft in 1966, and their experience talking about the development of Indo-European languages while tripping on LSD (12-13). During this trip, he dispenses information that proves critical to di Prima; in response to her question of "where did it go wrong," in regard to America, Olson intones: "Rotten from the very beginning. Constitution written by a bunch of gangsters to exploit a continent"—an idea that di Prima invokes in *Revolutionary Letters* and in her anarchist activism with the Diggers in San Francisco (20). After his passing in 1970, di Prima visits him in dreams—recounting a 1974 dream of wandering Gloucester, searching for him (evoking "The

Librarian," Olson's own Gloucester-based dream poem), and receiving what Robert Duncan called "Visitations," where it was "as if Charles was in the house, leaning of the edge of [her] desk, sitting at the table, or hanging out in the redwood garage across the road" in Tomales Bay during the era she was writing *Loba* (42).

Most vivid in the winding conversations about myth, origins, and structures of knowledge that di Prima and Olson shared in 1966, tripping on LSD, is their deeply shared connection in terms of poetic thought, coming to terms with the larger structures and patterns whose material traces run throughout their libraries. They shared books—pilfered by John Wieners from Diane di Prima's library, as she recounts in her Charles Olson Memorial Lectures—bibliographies on Eastern religion, and insights in their shared lifetimes, and then later, dreams. This synergy, not to mention lineage, has been under-acknowledged and left largely unexplored, perhaps as a result of the artificial separation of Olson and di Prima according to literary genre—Black Mountain and Beat, respectively. This devotion to legibility by genre, a critical issue in academic discourse on twentieth-century poetry, obscures the permeability of writing genre in the 1950s and 1960s, which Mary Paniccia Carden notes through the publication of Olson by Totem Press, or Kerouac's publications in the *Black Mountain Review* (7). And while there is no reason *not* to place di Prima and Olson together in terms of their literary contributions, the publication of di Prima's Olson lectures shows that there is ample affirmative reason to connect their work even more thoroughly given the ways that these two poets have been canonized in recent decades. As the "Introduction" to *Lost & Found*'s publication of her Olson Memorial Lectures indicates, it would be "a mistake to limit the conversation between these two makers to the confines of just two decades, or even this and the last century," given both of their commitments to understanding "the very beginnings of life on the American continent," not to mention Indo-European civilization, mythmaking, and cosmology alike ("Old Father, Old Artificer" 2).

While Charles Olson is by no means a mainstream poet, his work has received remarkably attentive treatment at the hands of George Butterick and Ralph Maud, as well as wider discussion in monographs and scholarly articles. Indeed, the very presence of the Charles Olson Memorial Lectures at the University of Buffalo, as well as long-term projects such as "A Plan for a Curriculum of the Soul"—in which poets from Joanne Kyger to Alice Notley, Gerrit Lansing, Robert Duncan, and others created "fascicles," or chapbooks that illuminated part of Olson's aforementioned curriculum—confirms the way that poets signal their understanding of Olson's achievements, and his influence on their work.

Diane di Prima remains both iconic and understudied, despite her prominent role in postwar American poetry and publishing. The most authoritative framings of her poetics and experience are in her own words; *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* remains a cornerstone of the female experience in post-World War Two America, addressing the repressive social standards of the day, di Prima's upbringing in Brooklyn as an Italian-American, and her early years of living in New York City that involved reading, writing, and publishing extensively. Scholarship on di Prima tends to occur in book chapters or articles, and focuses on a wide range of features related to her Italian-American heritage (Roseanne Giannini Quinn, Blossom S. Kirschenbaum), embodiment of feminism (Polina Mackay, "Politics of Feminist Revision in Di Prima's *Loba*"), or Beat affiliation (Benjamin Lee's "Avant-Garde Poetry as Subcultural Practice: Mailer and Di Prima's Hipsters"). While a few dissertations, especially those that address the Beat era, take her work as their sole subject, only one monograph is set for publication on di Prima—*Visionary Poetics and the Hidden Religions*, by David Stephen Calonne (Bloomsbury 2019). Given this, di Prima's own voice remains the best vehicle to contextualize her extensive work and contributions to twentieth-century poetics. Even better, this is a voice-in-progress: we are still reckoning with the specific impact of her legacy even as she actively writes, publishes, and works with younger poets and scholars today.

So while decades of focused scholarship give us a firmer sense of Olson's poetics, to which we can add the specific details of the Maud/Olson Library, there remains a serious need for documentation of di Prima's poetics through her major projects—including *Revolutionary Letters* and *Loba*, two of her most extensive works that were begun in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In addition to addressing her occult library, I also explore how di Prima's work in *Revolutionary Letters* allows us to more fully answer how certain forms of poetic knowledge become material—as books, broadsides, performances, even experiences—and the political nature of what it means to work with and structure these forms.

A Roadmap

In the context of this dissertation, I'll closely examine three entities: the Maud/Olson Library, the publishing history and poetics of Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, and Diane di Prima's occult library. These topics do not address the full extent of what it means for knowledge to take material form in postwar American poetry; rather, I intend these chapters as first steps into little-traveled territory in terms of both Olson and di Prima scholarship. I seek to bring attention to the monumental work of these poets and the archival traces that remain for us to examine, as well as contextualize opportunities to clear the ground for the further depth of research, and indeed archival intervention, that these poets absolutely require.

To that end, the first chapter addresses Charles Olson's approach to the conceptual development of his own library through his archival and book-collecting habits, especially as they relate to his research on Herman Melville's reading in *Call Me Ishmael*. I explore how his commitment to bibliography aligns with his concept of the "postmodern" (a term Olson coined in 1951, in a letter to Robert Creeley) as a profusion of information, requiring new ways to store and navigate materials. Olson's perspective on libraries and knowledge-building elaborates on his idea of

polis, a key theme in his work that explores the idea of political community. This commitment is evident in the possibilities of the Maud/Olson Library, a collection built by Olson scholar Ralph Maud that includes a copy of every book Olson was ever thought to have read, including transcriptions of Olson's marginalia and specialized bookplates. I hone in on the William Butler Yeats section of the Maud/Olson Library—a poet who was one of Olson's first objects of study as an undergraduate—to show that while this library has been considered a "facsimile" of Olson's, it in fact has its own highly unique material qualities that can broaden our conception of how to make meaning from a "poet's library" as a conceptual and material unit, even in the absence of material evidence of provenance to the poet himself. Waltzing through the stacks and specific material qualities of the Maud/Olson Library allows us to see the political and archival dimensions of what it means when poets collect knowledge, and makes vivid the immensity of both Olson's and Maud's contributions to our understanding of this.

In my second chapter, I turn to a set of materials by Diane di Prima—the first three years of printed *Revolutionary Letters*, before its debut in 1971 as a City Lights Pocket Poets edition. In its early years, the poems were syndicated dispatches to counterculture newspapers, performances on the steps of City Hall with Peter Coyote, and mimeographed sheets printed by the Diggers' publishing arm, Communications Co. The poems themselves challenge what constitutes poetic knowledge by writing about lived experience, and the printed forms of subsequent other free editions of the work show that for di Prima, poetry must live and breathe in the world. This type of poetry gives it a specific relationship to material conditions, as well as makes it inherently political, given the efforts of New Criticism and postwar academic criticism to isolate the world of the poem into a hermetically-sealed hermeneutic space. The separation of art from life, explored by Amiri Baraka in *Blues People* in light of the development of African-American musical traditions, has deep historical roots in Western European culture. He notes the widespread presence of art in the pre-Renaissance

era, when art emanated from the Church, but argues "the discarding of the religious attitude for the 'enlightened' concepts of the Renaissance also created the schism between what was art and what was life," and cites Brooks Adams' idea of the "economic mind over the imaginative" (29).[4] Di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* resists this practice poetically and in its material forms, telling us we must understand history and poetry together for the revolution.[5]

In my third chapter, after exploring the early print history of this work as indicative of poetic knowledge designed to impact the world it lives in, I argue that any reading of *Revolutionary Letters*

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[4] Baraka dives deep into history to determine how African culture juxtaposed so harshly with Western culture in the first moments of slavery, seeking the deep history of his subject in context with wider history itself. For Baraka, even the term "blues people," as defined by Ralph Ellison, "those who accepted and lived close to their folk experience," is rooted deeply in class structures in the United States, and the illusion of middle class respectability; Baraka argues that black Americans, after the Emancipation Proclamation, attempted to stretch as far away from folk traditions as possible in a form of cultural assimilation (176).

[5] The political dimensions of middle-class respectability, the separation of art from life, and the severing of contemporaneous experience from its historical roots are all paradigms that di Prima shatters in *Revolutionary Letters*, which makes the reception of this work in academic communities so surprising (or rather, predictably unsurprising). When academic audiences discuss *Revolutionary Letters*, the term "domestic" appears most often to describe the work's central theme, generally related to interpretations of di Prima in her initial Beat milieu and stemming from her own accounts of providing food, shelter, and emotional support to many male writers in the literary scene. Scholars such as Erik Mortensen read di Prima's work as "the domestic coupled with the rebellious" that "uses supposedly mundane "women's work" in politically subversive ways" (40). Mortensen cites textual evidence for this in the opening of "Revolutionary Letter #3":

> "store water; make a point of filling your bathtub
> at the first news of trouble: they turned off the water
> in the 4th ward for a whole day during the Newark riots" ("Revolutionary Letter #3")

Referencing the violent 1967 Newark riots in New Jersey that shut down the city and led to extensive police brutality targeting the local black community, di Prima's practical tone ("filling your bathtub") far exceeds the criteria for "domestic" or "women's work" in a political era of protest and counterculture, even if subversive. This is not to say that reading domesticity is amiss: *Revolutionary Letters* might be seen as a prime example of the feminist practice of so-called ethics of care, as well as an important reformulation of domesticity and female identity in midcentury America. However, this critical focus on domesticity may, at times, disarm us into characterizing di Prima's work only on a surface level, comforted by concrete details and simple language on elements of home, food, and survival despite its larger, looming themes.

without clarifying its larger thematic project obscures how di Prima's poetic output—arguably on the whole—works on multiple levels of meaning and exploration. While di Prima makes clear that the stakes of *Revolutionary Letters* begin with the body—"I have just realized that the stakes are myself" is the first line of "Revolutionary Letter #1"—the primary tool of the revolution is an ability to recuperate occulted knowledge in order to contact and understand "ALL LEVELS of one's own being" ("Revolutionary Letter #45). Just as di Prima's extensive work with publishing *The Floating Bear* and Poets Press shows her ability to build structures outside of traditional institutions to share work, she likewise crafts a bespoke mixture of spiritual authority, including "Christ, Buddha, Krishna, Paracelsus" as spiritual exemplar to guide how we might "reclaim the planet, re-occupy / this ground," dreaming of a time when "the earth / BELONGS, at last, TO THE LIVING" ("Revolutionary Letter #35"). Di Prima forges her own structures of meaning within the poems, cosmologically speaking, and the "revolutionary" aspect of these letters is activated when we seek to understand these structures on their own terms.

In my fourth chapter, I delve deeper into this topic by exploring "Revolutionary Letter #53," subtitled "How to Become a Walking Alchemical Experiment," a poem that demonstrates alchemical knowledge of the *magnum opus* alongside a tangible, embodied sense of the environmental and political anxieties in the 1960s and 1970s. I demonstrate that the concept of alchemy in di Prima' poetry serves as a key example of how to preserve erased and occulted knowledge in the postwar era. When viewed alongside other poets interested in the occult, such as W. B. Yeats and Jack Spicer, di Prima's poetics makes clear how twentieth-century poets might study and reinvigorate obscure forms of knowledge by reanimating them in their contemporaneous political context. Likewise, it recalls the vignettes that characterize this dissertation's introduction, which center on the debate over *who* can know *what* in post-World War Two America's split between scientific and humanistic knowledge, as well as the necessity of continuing to challenge this paradigm.

Di Prima's in-depth knowledge of alchemical traditions has definitive material traces in her own "occult library," a self-curated collection that dates from 1967 and includes topics ranging from alchemy to Soma ritual, medieval mysticism to crystal healing. In my final chapter, I examine the specific material qualities of the hundreds of books that comprise this collection, including arrangement, annotation, and evidence of use, in order to suggest how they relate to di Prima's poetic practice. For di Prima, her poems resist straightforward association with the source texts in her library, especially since her works often span decades (she writes poems for *Revolutionary Letters* and *Loba* still today). Thus, I investigate her library in light of statements she has shared about the poetics of some of her more extensive projects, such as *Loba*, to see what might be gained from reading the library as its own type of poetic act.

At its core, this dissertation questions the fragmentation of knowledge in postwar America, from the consciousness of a scientific era that sought to distill everything down to its minute parts—atoms, information, archives, scholarly disciplines. At each turn, this fracturing is political, in that knowledge (or lack thereof) is an act of governing, power, agency. It is also literally political, historically speaking. Both Olson and fellow poet Muriel Rukeyser worked in the Office of War Information starting in 1942, where Olson was the Assistant Chief of the Foreign Language Division, and Rukeyser a Visual Information Specialist. In a statement regarding her work, Rukeyser writes "by a tremendous and total effort, our civilization can grow in every part so that it can forever crush the fascist threat of brutalizing whatever good we have gained."[6] Despite Rukeyser's optimism, the Office of War Information was unable to provide an antidote to the rising horrors of World War Two. And indeed, the rising tides of information management—as indicated by Rukeyser's very title,

[6] Manuscript box (Rukeyser). United States. War Information Office. Graphics Department. Memoranda (8) relating to various projects. Typescripts and typescript carbons, one signed, dated Dec. 14 1942-April 22, 1943. 2 folders. Statement re: her work. Typescript, unsigned, dated Dec. 1, 1942.

specializing in visual propaganda—meant that both Olson and Rukeyser were highly aware of the new ways knowledge was being created and distributed in light of information theory and cybernetics, during an era of increasing government surveillance and control. In 1944, Olson resigned from his post, citing the Office's censorship of war news. Two years later, he composed "La Preface," one of the first poems to mention the Holocaust, for the art opening of his friend Corrado Cagli, a Roman sculptor who had been at the liberation of Buchenwald in 1945.

Later, both Olson and Rukeyser were persecuted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for their time in the Office—Rukeyser upon suspicions of communism and Olson while Rector at Black Mountain College (Middleton 123). As Diane di Prima remembers, "I grew up in the world of McCarthy, of the death of the Rosenbergs and of Wilhelm Reich, of endless witch hunts;" she and LeRoi Jones were both arrested by the FBI on obscenity charges for *Floating Bear #9*, a mailed-out mimeograph magazine that had caught the eye of the mail censors in prison (*The Poetry Deal* 3). By the 1950s and 1960s, during the height of Cold War tension, even Ed Sanders' request for a book of historical information—Egyptian hieroglyphs—was denied due to suspicions over what information it *really* contained. The poet Vincent Ferrini, an inspiration to Charles Olson and anarchist resident of Gloucester, Massachusetts, was targeted for his teaching and union work by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings. History, in the hands of bards, was seen as a weapon. And thus, history remains contained in distinct boxes—of individual memory, poet archives that spread across institutions and geographies, and libraries that have been dispersed. Politically speaking, this is convenient for the power structures that have made this inevitable in the United States. But ethically, for those of us who study literature, we are obligated to search across these containers for narratives that may be hidden by material circumstance.

In "Paracelsus: An Appreciation," Diane di Prima writes that "the alchemists of Paracelsus' day saw unity (a single substance, or principle under many disguises) where we spend years

cataloguing differences: they felt the world as organic" (26). Combined with Brooks Adams' idea that subjects, not books, should be the unit of collection and analysis in twentieth-century libraries, this project offers an alternative to the years spent literally cataloging, as in libraries, the atomic particles of a poet's library, when Olson and di Prima's libraries can be felt organically in their current instantiations. Di Prima continues, "the *materia prima* is the single substance of which all matter is composed, as "all pots are of clay"" (29). In this sense, this dissertation seeks to honor the foundational work of Ammiel Alcalay's *a little history* by addressing certain challenges posed within the work, particularly where Alcalay discusses how we negotiate "information overload on the one hand, and containment—excluded areas—on the other," and asks of our most recent poetic history: "how do you categorize information, how do you deal with knowledge, how do you find it, how do you transmit it" ? (69). Speaking beyond Olson's own knowledge-building practices, to the knowledge-structuring practices that inform our understanding of Olson's context, Alcalay notes the distortion of history that literary genres like Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, Beat, and other labels introduce where they "get us to one section of the shelf without letting us see the whole library" (37). Libraries, then, are *recourse*—for poets assembling knowledge, and for those of us who seek to understand history not as sections on a shelf, but as a vast and rhizomatic extension of multiple voices across material forms. In particular, libraries that belong to poets are some of the most potent and unmediated artifacts to address the questions Alcalay asks. With little surprise, they are also some of the most precarious and institutionally misunderstood archives that stand in the balance today. To rectify this, in what follows, I seek to sketch the contours of Charles Olson and Diane di Prima's libraries and material forms of knowledge-building. In doing so, we might better understand the poetics—or in di Prima's alchemical metaphor, the clay that gives these objects their unity and meaning.

Chapter 1: "Biblio. And Library": Charles Olson and the Maud/Olson Library

Book history follows the principle of an entropic universe: cohesion succumbs to eventual diffusion. In *a little history*, Ammiel Alcalay notes that the flow of historical materials between people, institutions, and spaces makes it so that "the record of work...is atomized, pulled apart, stored in separate containers, making it much harder for us to inhabit coherent stories, to make sense of ourselves, our history, and the times we live in" (8). Earlier in the twentieth century, the poet Charles Olson came to a similar conclusion during his scholarship on Herman Melville and in particular, Melville's reading practices. Due to financial troubles in the family, Melville's richly annotated library was sold after his death in 1891 to dealers all over the East Coast. Beginning in 1933, Olson began to identify and gather these books from booksellers. In reconstituting this collection, he was one of the first scholars to encounter Melville's reading notes—sometimes mere "x" marks in the margin, but as in the case of his Shakespeare, sometimes revealingly annotated (Charters 6). During his graduate work at Harvard's doctoral program in American Civilizations from 1936 until 1939, Olson analyzed these annotations alongside Melville's research on the New England whaling industry, and argued for their fundamental connection to *Moby Dick* (1851) (Charters 8, 9). A 1937 essay, "Lear and Moby Dick," received praise from Harvard scholar F. O. Matthiessen in his 1941 book, *American Renaissance.*

Olson completed a book-length draft of his scholarship on Melville's reading practices and library in 1940, then placed this material aside as he went on to work at the Office of War Information in 1942 as the Assistant Chief of the Foreign Language Division. After he resigned his post in 1944 in protest of government censorship policies, Olson's manuscript published as *Call Me Ishmael* in 1947, at which point he turned his comprehensive list of Melville's books over to Merton Sealts who completed *Melville's Reading* (1948) by building on Olson's inventories (Maud 39). Around this time, in the 1950s during the height of anti-Communist panic, Cyril Lionel Robert James

composed *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (1953) while detained for months on Ellis Island under political suspicions of subversion. In *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, James explored the political dimensions of *Moby Dick* and Melville, particularly on the axis of totalitarianism and democracy that became so immediately relevant in Cold War America. While Olson's and James' fates were radically different, their shared interest marks the political and historical relevance of Melville scholarship at the time—at once neglected by mainstream scholarship yet politically salient, if not downright subversive.

David Herd, in the introduction to *Contemporary Olson*, describes Olson's fundamental contribution as no less than "alter[ing] the field of Melville studies, both as archivist (re-assembling Melville's library) and through his radical re-contextualization of *Moby-Dick*" (1). This "re-contextualization" takes place both materially and conceptually, setting the stage for a methodological lineage; Olson's own approach to Melville would become a template for scholars to one day address *The Maximus Poems* through Olson's own sprawling piles of books. As Ann Charters notes in her *Olson/Melville: A Study in Affinity* (1968), which traces Olson's approach to Melville, Olson's work amounts to more than that of a "scholar or academic critic," but more dramatically, is a "basic restructuring of the entire human universe" (4). As she and others have argued, Olson's utilization of Melville, books, and bibliography as part of a larger cosmological and poetic project is one of the hallmarks of his influence. Projects such as Richard Grossinger's *Olson-Melville Sourcebooks* (1976), Albert Glover and Jack Clarke's decades-long chapbook or fascicle series, "A Plan for the Curriculum of the Soul" that includes authors such as Gerrit Lansing, Robert Duncan, and Joanne Kyger, Charters' aforementioned work, and perhaps most monumentally, Ralph Maud's *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography* (1996), all follow the impulse to map Olson's own reading as a way to understand his work, just as Olson did with Melville.

Ralph Maud, however, set out on a quest to match Olson's own extreme bibliophilic impulse. Over the course of his own lifetime, Ralph Maud collected copies of books that he deduced Olson had read, drawing on evidence in his poetry, correspondence, teaching materials, and even his apartment at 28 Fort Square. Maud's letters to and from friends and book dealers testify to the obsessive and painstaking nature of this project, with printouts of the online rare book dealer ABE Books, receipts from local bookstores totaling hundreds of dollars, and back-and-forth banter about specific copies and volumes. After Maud's passing in 2014, this collection of books, comprising over three thousand volumes, was transported to Gloucester, Massachusetts and named the Maud/Olson Library. There, in two shelf-lined rooms that overlook Gloucester Harbor, the collection lives with Ralph Maud's personal papers, anchored by Charles Olson's own massive, cigarette-burned, paint-streaked writing desk.

While the theme of the Maud/Olson Library, or MOL, speaks specifically to scholars of Olson and New American poetry, its unique material qualities allow us to think quite broadly of the institutional and material qualities of what we might conceptually deem a "poet's library." In its current form, and like the numerous archives and rare book reading rooms that Olson frequented during his lifetime, the Maud/Olson Library is a special collection in the institutional sense, in that it has rare volumes and primary source materials for the purposes of research. In particular, this collection's dual representation of Olson and also Maud makes vivid the possibilities of what happens when the material paradox of the bibliography as a conceptual act—summoning books that are materially absent but intellectually present—is challenged by being made incarnate. With regard to Olson's own interest in enumerative bibliography and books as shaping (or limiting) the field of what is possible to be known, the MOL provides insights into how Olson's conceptual project of shaping the "human universe" or postmodern knowledge itself, relates to and operates on specific material conditions.

For Olson, knowledge was always embodied, buried in the soil, material and real. The material qualities of the Maud/Olson Library are experimental grounds to consider Olson's priorities not as a "historian of ideas," but, in the words of his mentor Edward Dahlberg, a "historian of realities" (Maud 31). Olson's work relied on a symbiotic approach to the material considerations of his world—Gloucester, Mayan pot-shards, research in England on the colonial period—alongside the epistemological question of how we can touch what can be known. Even for Olson's cosmological approach, "space, like myth, had to be as actual, solid, and factual as everything else," and characterized by "insistence upon the concrete and literal condition of all cosmic forms" (Pattison, 2015, 62). We might then take Olson's work in book history and his own archival traces as an extension of his epistemological concerns, the bedrock of his very poetics.

Book collecting is tied to the practice of enumerative bibliography, and for Olson, these two activities are of key poetic importance because of the ways they demonstrate or inform the idea of complete knowledge of a subject. The idea of completeness, for the man who first coined the term "postmodern" and its concomitant connotations of fragmented, expanded, unknowable narratives, is a constant preoccupation for Olson. In his advice to Edward Dorn in *A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn* (1964) to "saturate" and "beat" a single subject until it is fully known, Olson argues that "the point is *to get all* that has been said on given subject" and not just through "*books:* they stop" but rather archival documents, primary sources, and other sources that expand the small world of published material (*Collected Prose*, 307). Completeness of Olson's own material traces is elusive, as it is for many other authors, as his materials are housed in multiple special collections across North America, including the Maud/Olson Library. Yet, if, after Benjamin Friedlander, we consider Olson's work as a "borderless archive" that rejects the idea of "the book as ultimate horizon," we might more fully explore the iterative, possibly dialectic relationship between knowledge and its

material form when the question of completeness or saturation consistently eludes us.[7] This postmodern question not only informs the conceptual structure of the Maud/Olson Library, but also acquisitions within institutions tasked with cultural preservation in the era after World War Two. Two questions resonate: how do we contain a rapidly proliferating body of knowledge in stable material form, and how is this receding horizon of completeness influenced by the ramifications of information overload?

To address this, I will first establish the history of the MOL in its current material form, including how its status as a knowledge-building project derives from Olson's own methodologies and poetics. I will then delineate the conceptual foundation of the Library through Maud's scholarship and correspondence, with particular eye towards Jack Clarke's (1989) distinction between bibliography and library—or, what can be known versus owned—and how this operates specifically within the Maud/Olson Library. After examining both bibliography and library as they appear in Olson's own work, I will explore how the MOL's conceptual form is challenged and ultimately broadened by its material qualities, including the specific books within it, the open stack format of the MOL, and the possibilities of affective, embodied responses within it.

While recent scholarship is increasingly addressing how Olson's approach to knowledge-building applies in the era of information overload, including Peter Stephens' *The Poetics of Information Overload* (2015), which anchors the embodied qualities of Olson's approach to information, and Todd F. Tietchen's *Technomodern Poetics: The American Literary Avant-Garde at the Start of the Information Age* (2018), which addresses Olson's utilization of cybernetic theory, we have yet to address the archival implications of these forms of understanding. The Maud/Olson Library affords an opportunity to not just examine Olson's knowledge-building practices and how they might reflect a

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[7] The source of this citation is identified in Rachel Blau DuPlessis' (2015) essay "Olson and his *Maximus Poems*" in *Contemporary Olson*.

postwar American sense of information management, but also the archival elements that render this process visible and will preserve it for future generations of poets and scholars. By negotiating the conceptual and the material in the Maud/Olson Library, I will contextualize the possibilities of the space as a model for the very real material considerations of non-institutionalized archival spaces and collections, in an era marked by the proliferation of knowledge with increasingly destabilized structures in which to house it.

Material: Making the Maud/Olson Library

In his 2016 essay, "Driving Charles Olson's Brain," Gregor Gibson, a writer, book dealer, and founding member of the Maud/Olson steering committee, recounts the odyssey he took in 2015 after Maud's 2014 passing to pack up and relocate the Library from Vancouver to Gloucester, where Maud's bequest had donated it to the Gloucester Writers Center. Joined by Henry Ferrini, the Director of the Gloucester Writers Center, documentary filmmaker, and nephew of Vincent Ferrini (addressee of the first *Maximus* letters), Gibson describes the transcontinental drive and its deep reveal of America's "sprawling, gorgeous, deep, murderous, inscrutable" self. Gibson then applies this same litany of adjectives, in the very same order, to "Olson's Brain:" his term of affection for the Maud/Olson Library. This repetition weaves together the vastness of the American landscape and of Olson's knowledge, invoking the sublime ("gorgeous...murderous") and conceptualizing the immensity of Maud's project and its possibilities.

The books, as Maud envisioned them, are materials that forge direct lines back to Olson. When possible, Maud transcribed Olson's own marginalia into the books he had collected, painstakingly copied from the original books in Olson's library that are catalogued and housed at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. Maud also created a bookplate for each item, containing a summary of the book's relationship to Olson and sometimes jotting down page numbers where

annotations had been carefully inscribed. Decades of Maud's life were spent hunting down copies of books Olson had read and accessioning them into his Library via annotation and bookplates. Thus, the Library not only represents "Olson's Brain," using books as metonymy for the knowledge they provided Olson, but also "Maud's Brain:" the obsessive scholarly and personal project of assembling such a vast and indeed unusual corpus of materials.

The inventory of the Library was comprehensively published as Issue #64, #65, #66 of *The Minutes of the Charles Olson Society*, in conjunction with the Charles Olson Centenary Conference at Simon Fraser University from June 4th to 6th in 2010, as the "Catalogue of the Ralph Maud Collection of Charles Olson's Books." This publication crystallized, to some extent, a complex acquisitional and bibliographic history that is now materially solidified and accessible on the tidy shelves of the Maud/Olson Library in Gloucester, at 108 East Main Street, right down the street from the Gloucester Writers Center (housed in Vincent Ferrini's old framing shop and home). Launched in spring 2016 with support from André Spears, the Library now also holds the Ralph Maud papers and Charles Olson's writing desk from 28 Fort Square. Ann Charters has donated Theresa Bernstein paintings, and Thorpe Feidt paintings line the hallway. The poet, and close friend of Olson, Gerrit Lansing was also known to donate materials, and even annotate Maud's bookplates with his own personal knowledge of Olson's reading. The collection is community-oriented, with the scholars, writers, and artists that know the most about Ralph Maud and Charles Olson serving on the steering committee or advising in various formal or informal capacities. Thus, the Maud/Olson Library is not just a museum of Maud's collection, but continues to be curated collectively by those who understand its context best.

Ralph Maud donated the collection to the Gloucester Writers Center before he passed away, with the understanding that it could be guaranteed to be housed and displayed in a dedicated space in Gloucester for at least five years (Spears). The books may well have remained in Vancouver, at

the Simon Fraser University Library, along with Olson's desk and portrait by Ephraim Doner, but in October 2015 an agreement was reached and Miriam Nichols, Alan Franey, Peter Grant, Henry Ferrini, and Gregor Gibson set the Library to sail to Gloucester in a U-Haul (Spears 2016). The shape of the Maud/Olson Library remains to be determined; neither its location nor funding is necessarily permanent. However, the Gloucester Writers Center provides key contextualization and audience for the Maud/Olson Library, in the former's mission to offer extensive curricula and community that supports local writers across education levels and genres.

To fully understand the capacities of the Maud/Olson Library, we must understand the space as a vector into understanding each word in its title: Maud, the scholar; Olson, the poet who approaches knowledge as fundamentally material; the "Library" as an institutional unit that can be reframed in light of the conceptual qualities of the men whose brains it purports to represent. Assessing the interplay across these categories gives us greater insight into the possibilities and limitations of "Olson's Brain," as well as lessons on formulating special collections spaces and experiences, perhaps beyond closed stacks or archival boxes, that reflect their creators and contents.

Conceptual: Making the Maud/Olson Library

While two short years passed between Maud's death and the establishment of the Maud/Olson Library, the scholarship represented on its shelves has been culminating for decades, fed by Maud's own talents and the synergistic fact that scholars who study Olson tend to aim for staggering thoroughness. George Butterick, a student of Olson's and the curator of Literary Archives at University of Connecticut at Storrs during the acquisition of Olson's materials, produced a "Preliminary List" that Maud cites (in Issue #17 of *The Minutes of the Charles Olson Society* in 1996, noted by Spears). Butterick had extensive interest in Olson's books, and augmented the collection at Storrs with additional volumes of books Olson was thought to have read. Maud's project, though, is

a unique combination of Olsonia and collecting chops. No stranger to building large-scale book collections, he is largely responsible for the Contemporary Literature Collection at Simon Fraser, where he acquired pamphlets, chapbooks, so-called little magazines, and other ephemeral items representing the years from 1945 to 1965. Thus, while the Maud/Olson Library currently does not have an institutional affiliation, its generator was highly skilled in navigating traditional environments for acquiring and maintaining special collection resources.

In particular, Ralph Maud's papers within the Maud/Olson Library offer a close-at-hand means of contextualizing the efforts that went into the development of his collection. The papers, currently being cataloged by Gregor Gibson, consist largely of correspondence that reveals the deeply networked nature of the project of collecting Olson's books. A crucial aspect of this story is Jack Clarke, and his visit to 28 Fort Square in 1965 after Betty Olson's death in a car accident. To lure Olson home again (he had not been back in the apartment since her death), Jack and Sue Clarke went in to help with the basics—cleaning floors, placing books back on shelves. In this process, Jack Clarke began to create an inventory of Olson's books in a series of small notebooks, which he recounts in a letter dated January 19th, 1989 that is now housed in the "Jack Clarke" file of the Ralph Maud papers. This letter, while it establishes the story of the Clarke list that becomes a basis for Maud's inventory, highlights some fundamental qualities of the project:

> When we arrived the back door was open, the padlock broken, so it had been entered by unknown persons already. Jean and I secured the place. As far as she could tell, nothing was missing. I assume the library was fairly intact at the date of the inventory. Later, when George [Butterick] actually took possession of the books, things had by then come up missing (why he made use of my list in the archive magazine), some before his death, especially from the other side where he had boxes

> (Linda Parker might know about this period), some after, to family, etc. (Kate and Connie were there directly - unfortunately things got disposed of - not books, but things - which I know George wanted for the archive. Not big things, Laurence pissing, Quetzal's thigh, but simply, say, a shirt to show size etc., or a table used to write on, an old wobbly throw-away anything. The big things got sold anyway, so neither archive nor family has them, though George was always looking out for stuff that might come up for sale in N.Y. this way to buy back for the archive (though resources always slim post-Olson #10.). Jean has some books of Charles that never entered the archive. Of course this works both ways, e.g., Charles had many of Harvey's books on loan which George would never let him have back, like 2 sets of the Historica Highways. So, along with Linda, Harvey, & Kate, Boer was also in and out of the Fort in this time frame (though his memory leaves a lot to be desired, to put it mildly), but I'm afraid you'll only get 'stories' if anything as to discrepancies between my list of 1965 and the actual situation, 1970. So I guess it's quite fortunate that more were not lost in this period (mainly because of annotation, obviously), because the place was never secure except when he was occupying it…

This passage, worth quoting at length because of its densely intersecting themes, highlights the basic question of household security in gauging the accuracy of Olson's library, since his home had been broken into by "unknown persons" by the time Clarke began his inventory. This instability is accompanied by tension between how archives and families approach objects: Butterick had wanted a shirt to show Olson's size, for instance, while Connie and Kate (Olson's former wife and their daughter) had disposed of many personal belongings in cleaning out the apartment. The passage contains a variety of names, highlighting the dense social structures that govern the distribution of

Olson's books or evidence of their having been there, including Jean's books that "never entered the archive," Olson's borrowed copies that Butterick claimed for Storrs. Finally, Clarke characterizes the list as highly permeable, since Olson's place was only "secure" when Olson himself was in it, and otherwise the flow of books between people in Olson's milieu can be characterized only by disparate "stories." For Clarke, while the list technically solidifies Olson's collection at a certain time, its entire premise is marked by instability, permeability, and the impossibility of completeness.

This impossibility of completeness is matched only by the intensity of our desire for it. Reflecting on a moment in Gloucester when Maud arrived at Olson's 28 Fort Square apartment, only to interrupt him in the act of writing in a poem, Maud asserts that observing Olson's desk and room scattered with books gave way to the

> …conviction that to follow the evidences of Olson's reading—the books he kept, the books he stored or gave away, the books that the poems, essays, and letters reveal he used, the significant articles in magazines he was sent or read at the drugstore counter or whatever (there is so much evidence, and the abundance is to the point)—to follow Olson's movement within these source works is the best way to get into the poems, which, as I witnessed, are often a direct extension of his reading. The life of the poet was a life within books. (Maud 6-7)

Parentheticals often paradoxically set aside a key point—here, the question of "abundance" of evidence in the sheer variety of scope of Olson's reading. Of primary importance is the manifold nature of the material, much of it ephemeral or possibly inconclusive. Materials that we might traditionally conceive of as "ephemera," including the descriptions of "drugstore counter" or "whatever" magazine article, designed for limited use or circulation with the eventual fate of being

discarded, are calcified in Olson's letters, lectures, and poems, meticulously reconstructed and traced by Maud. The very materiality of some of these items resists completeness, and it is a testament to Maud's skills as a collector that so much of it remains preserved.

Completeness plagues Maud's project until its arrival at Gloucester: a moment that constitutes only temporary stasis. André Spears (2016) notes that of approximately 800 books that were listed in Maud's original inventory, 560 remain at Simon Fraser University and the others are not accounted for in the Maud/Olson Library. Spears also acknowledges that given the status of Olson scholarship in the United States, there exists a "possible alternate view of the Maud/Olson Library as a waste of time and money, a collection of replicas that are basically fakes, from which are missing the bibliophilic items of true value." This skeptical alternative, however, does not stand up to close examination of the history and structure of the Maud/Olson Library. The books are not replicas of Olson so much as they are originals from Maud: a material testament to his conceptual project while they gesture also towards Olson's own knowledge and reading practices. Rather than take the lack—rather, impossibility—of completeness in a bibliographic project like this as a given, we might instead consider it more didactically as part of the conceptual work of the MOL in its representation of Olson's knowledge practices. It underscores, in material form, that knowledge-building is *always* in process, despite the appearances of fixity in material instantiations like libraries or archives. This indeterminacy, this in-processness, reminds us of Olson's own always-unfinished work of scoping fields of knowledge, negotiating the postmodern problem of information overload. Fortunately, the Maud/Olson Library offers us a few sense-making techniques.

"Biblio. and Library"

On the one hand, the question of completeness thus far refers to the totality of the books themselves. Yet on the other, completeness and its impossibility in the context of the Maud/Olson

Library may also refer to Olson's reading practices, including what was actually *read* and why this matters. Of Olson's Master's thesis, Maud cautions that we need not be "gulled into assuming that everything mentioned has been read," noting that Olson's passing allusions to major literary works do not appear in his later library or necessarily in his poetry (26). Likewise, Gerrit Lansing annotates the Maud bookplate of *Phenomenology of Perception* by M. Merleau-Ponty (translated by Colin Smith) with the simple "Did O see the book?"

The difficulty of comprehensiveness over the course of a lifetime means that there is no stable, material concept of a library that was expanding ever-outward. The only evidence we truly have of Olson's reading practice must be obtained through multimodal sources, given its existence in his actual books, Ralph Maud's Olson library, as well as Olson's letters, lectures, poetry, interviews, and other material traces. Olson's financial circumstances, ever unstable, as well as his intellectual interests shaped his library as a living thing. And of course, very few individuals have a stable library over the course of decades. How then, do we negotiate the conceptual project of the Maud/Olson Library alongside an understanding of Olson's own library? In the January 19th 1989 Jack Clarke letter to Ralph Maud, in which he describes the process of creating the first inventory in 1965, Clarke continues by describing the difference between his and Butterick lists of Olson's reading:

> Butterick's list in Olson doesn't include all the books here because:
>
> A) As you ask, some of the books are not his.
>
> B) Many of these titles, especially specialized, expensive ones, were borrowed from the SUNY library by Charles, so though 'his' he didn't own them - the dif. between biblio. & library.

C) Furthermore, many books recommended along the way were from memory, one he had seen or used previously, but not possessed at any time.

Here, Clarke identifies a key premise, expanded over points A, B, and C: the difference between "biblio. & library," as a result of many of Olson's books not being his own property. Clarke notes, "though 'his' he didn't own them," characterizing the "his" as Olson having intellectual command although not material ownership over the items. Library, for Clarke, implies some sense of material ownership.[8] However, one can "own" a book without possessing it materially, given the symbolic value of the book as metonym for Olson's knowledge and his distillation of the contents within it. Within this paradigm, the word "library" in the context of the Maud/Olson collection is indeed fitting—Maud established actual ownership over all of the books he assembled for the project—but Clarke's distinction highlights the conceptual paradox of the MOL. The MOL is a synthetic fabrication, a conceptual unit materialized by Maud that would not otherwise have ever become incarnate. To that end, in terms of technique, the only way to stabilize the concept of "Olson's Library" or, as Gibson calls it, "Olson's Brain," is enumerative bibliography—a practice closely tied to library-building as well as Olson's own critical work.

Enumerative bibliography entails the listing of publication and bibliographic (that is, book as physical object) information on items that relate to a specific subject, with the goal of author- or subject-specific comprehensiveness. It is perhaps one of Olson's earliest and most persistent literary forms: in the beginning of his Master's thesis, Olson provides "the first complete bibliography of Herman Melville ever attempted" (Maud 25), comprehensively bringing together unpublished letters,

[8]Diane di Prima recounts in "Old Father, Old Artificer": Charles Olson Memorial Lecture, that John Wieners borrowed her copy of *Hymns to the Goddess* by Arthur Avalon to give to Olson, and that "Charles never returned the *Hymns*, nor did I ask him for them when we finally met. I simply bought myself another copy" (7-8).

doctoral theses, and published works from across United States libraries. Later, in 1955, at Black Mountain, at Ed Dorn's request he writes *A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn*, which circulates privately for years until its printing by Donald Allen as a pamphlet by the Four Seasons Foundation in San Francisco in 1964 (Maud 40). While for the Maud/Olson Library, bibliographic knowledge of Olson underlies the conceptual and material unit of the "library" itself, for Olson, bibliography functions not as evidence of reading that has been accomplished, but rather as mapping the contours of what can be known based on textual evidence at a certain point in time. This practice of bibliography as testing the limits of what can be *known* in the future, as opposed to evidence of what has been read or digested in the *past*, is essential to understanding Olson's relationship to materiality—and thus, the way this understanding crystallizes on the Maud/Olson Library's shelves.

In *A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn*, Olson advocates for a "saturation job" of a subject—"to dig one thing or place or man," either archaeologically or enthusiastically (dig it?), until one's knowledge is exhaustive. Olson advocates for this process occurring within "primary documents," as Maud reprints:

> Repository #1: THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES, Wash., D.C.
> `` #2: Senate Documents (published)
> `` #3: Bureau of Am. Ethnology Reports & Bulletins
> (pub. by the Smithsonian Inst.)
> (*Collected Prose* 307)

Not only does Olson use the institutional language of the "repository," the overarching term for an organization that holds archives, collections, libraries, and other cultural heritage collections (Pearce-Moses), but he advocates first and foremost for an archival approach. Books, he argues just prior to

this list, only contain finite information that requires supplement, challenge, and further digging. Of course, Olson practiced what he preached; he recounts to Ann Charters in *Olson/Melville* how he chased a lead in a book to the Shaw Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society by sitting in their donor's kitchen, realizing the connection, and then making beeline for the archive (Charters 8, cited by Maud 1996, 8). Not only proficient in the interpersonal dealings of archival research, Olson was involved in their creation. In a March 16, 1950 letter to Frances Boldereff, he recounts going into a bookshop to find a copy of D. H. Lawrence's *Fantasia* and instead finding the bookseller in possession of a collection, whose sale he then brokered to the Library of Congress (Maud 87). While the worlds of archivist and academic are disparate today, as a result of efforts for professionalization in both fields over the course of the century, Olson offers a fluid model—more common in the first half of the twentieth century, during an era of interest in establishing special collections and also public libraries—that generatively blends researcher and collector roles in ways that feel unlikely today.

While characterized by an archival impulse, Olson's thinking was often shaped by information science, especially by Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics* (1948), which shows up almost wholesale in "The Kingfishers" (1949) (Middleton 157). In an echo of atomic theory, a popularly-known development of modern physics, Wiener framed humans as machines, in which all elements of information and communication could be reduced down to their parts. Olson's work with primary sources shows a strong interest in taxonomies of information and materials. For instance, Maud recounts his 1953 handout to freshmen that states "*fiction* is only one form of storytelling" and lists the next top five: "the dictionary, "the encyclopedia," "the library card catalogue," and "*Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature,*" then "Herodotus's *History*" and the daily newspaper (13). The variety of reference genres here as generative, *narrative* forms is striking for its dissonance with contemporaneous literary studies. I. A. Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) cites *Britannica-*

style resources as "negligible," while Olson wields them to great effect in "The Kingfishers," where Olson includes language from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to describe the bird's life cycle (Middleton 158). For Olson, returning to primary sources, to dictionaries, to library catalogues, to the fundamental units of information offers an opportunity to seek information at its source, recombine it on the atomic level, and develop new fields of understanding based therein.

For Olson, primary source information was an intellectual priority, and its presence in his work is reflected with varied degrees of "processed" and "unprocessed" information. After the traditional archival definition, "processed" collections have been fully accessioned by their repository, include a finding aid or other catalog record, and are served in a dedicated space in a particular manner based on the policies of the institution. Olson, sitting at a kitchen table of a literary executor and then pawing through boxes at the Massachusetts Historical Society, or wandering a bookstore only to purchase a significant collection, engages with primary sources at a highly unmediated and unprocessed level—he is often an active co-creator in the sources themselves. Thus, a possible parallel emerges between Olson's archival approach and his approach to reference. His approach to knowledge development is to build information up close to its source, before interpretation, in the act of collating its fundamental material or definitional existence.

This re-*source*-fulness as a strategy for assembling knowledge is fundamental to Olson's approach to bibliography as well, especially in his *Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn.* Dorn reflects on the *Bibliography* in his Olson Memorial Lectures at Buffalo in 1981, noting its meaningfulness to him, and specifically that

> the value for a student in a well-conceived bibliography is not in the bibliography's comprehension, or completeness, if such a completion were possible, but in the engagement of certain of its—I don't want to say "genes." But in the engagement of

> certain of its—I'd like to say here that the lighthearted depreciation of some of Olson's sources on the basis that some of them are dated—for instance, I've heard this charged against the Pleistocene work—or not up to date, leave me cold, and unimpressed. The value of a working instructional bibliography lies in its net of connections. It isn't concerned with the latest so-called "corrections" and insights of the latest worker, or the latest hot number. The value for a student in a well-conceived bibliography is not in the bibliography's comprehension, but in the engagement of certain of its genes. (12)

Dorn speaks iteratively here, looping back on his definition multiple times to refine the difference between the content and the connections within a bibliography. Fundamentally, the bibliography offers an opportunity to explore a "net of connections" that is not necessarily comprehensive, but demonstrates a path to certain foundational ideas, traditions, circumstances, or individuals—what Dorn is reluctant at first to call "genes." This biological approach envisions bibliography as a living organism, in possession of genetic matter than can be queried and explored, as well as vector to return to a source, to the cellular level of knowledge in this metaphor, by way of examining the interconnectedness of textuality.

Dorn goes on to suggest that the source-based quality of bibliography means it functions like a "map" that can be read in manifold ways, since maps are used to "go different places" and "do different things" depending on their users (13). Indeed, this is a useful template for the Maud/Olson Library on the whole, whose contents can be animated in a variety of ways depending on its audience. In the MOL, multiple prisms of intellectual depth filter the experience itself. These prisms—Olson's approach to reading, the actual subjects of his library, Maud's approach to Olson's reading, the depth of his research on this topic—exist in a vast array of archival materials, from

Olson's reading lists and correspondence, even his poetry, as well as Maud's letters, conversations, research, and more. In addition to this plethora of resources, both Olson and Maud's bibliographic obsession adds practically endless layers of meaning over the MOL. Like Dorn's "net of connections," each book is a vector to another, by means of its own bibliography, its presence in another's bibliography, or its relationship to a primary source. From this and from Clarke's definition, we might define bibliography as a fundamentally conceptual practice that negotiates presence and absence of materials simultaneously. Thus, it stands that when this conceptual form is made incarnate—into a library, like the Maud/Olson—that the materiality itself becomes a site for rapidly-expanding meaning. In what follows, I will demonstrate the particulars of this process on the Maud/Olson Library shelves.

This is Yeats Speaking (through the MOL)

The reading environment of special collections in general is characterized by a sense of isolation from the visual and material scope of the collection. While open stacks became a symbol of access in university libraries after World War Two, and while all library access policies are individually set according to the regulations and resources of their institution, special collections often operate on a reading room model in which materials are not available for the researcher to self-select but must instead be paged from a (presumably) more secure location (Hamlin 1981). This process often exists in complex interplay with open stack models, often within the same institution; Terry Belanger, summarizing student reports on special collections between 1976 and 1985, notes an "ancient New England library" in which many rare American first editions were discovered and subsequently "locked up," but not so a collection of incunabula that remained on the open stacks until 1967, with "scandalous" circulation cards affixed within (15). That is, "scandalous," because the "special" in special collections is enforced through policies of restricted access, designed to increase

supervision of rare materials to actively advocate for their secure preservation. Not only are the circulation cards likely damaging to the books from a conservation perspective, they indicate the scandalous appearance of leaving rare materials on open stacks, available to check out and take home.

In this access model, a researcher first scrutinizes catalog records, inventories, or finding aids to identify materials of interest. Of course, this step requires that materials are catalogued in the first place, or, depending on the researcher's location, that digital records are available. Then, once relevant materials have been identified, they are paged by a specialist, and delivered in a limited amount for the researcher to examine. Since all special collections may operate according to their own guidelines, often set by a curator, the amount of material that may be accessed at any given time is variable. Certain collections offer an archival folder at a time, an archival box at a time, or only a few books, and it is almost impossible for the average researcher to see the scope of the collection in its physical, material form, since browsing archival boxes or rare book stacks constitutes a security violation in most institutional cultures. The only way that an average researcher can ever gain a sense of scope in terms of the collection is through its metadata, whether that be catalog record or a more extensive finding aid. Once again, this also only covers materials that have been catalogued, meaning that there is always backlog information or acquisitions that a researcher can never account for at all, unless they are telepathic or have an inside connection to the repository.[9]

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[9] Thus, the data about the items themselves, that is, metadata, is the only avenue for scoping a collection, and researchers develop techniques accordingly. Keyword search, extensive reading of secondary sources, trial and error: all these methods factor in to navigating a large collection in a reading room that permits limited access to its materials. Particularly with the advent of digital catalogs, the "metadata is the interface" and the means through which certain items may become visible or invisible (Jennifer Schaffner, "The Metadata is the Interface Better Description for Better Discovery of Archives and Special Collections, Synthesized from User Studies" OCLC Research, 2009). Depending on whether its format is extensible, meaning whether it is readily translated into other formats or software applications, the "data" quality of metadata can be useful for visualization. Additionally, certain institutions, such as The New York Public Library, have invested in "discovery layers" that are applied on top of the catalog, that allow readers to model patterns, visualize subjects,

In contrast to this, while it remains a special collection because of its mix of rare book and archival resources, the rooms of the Maud/Olson Library simply *are*—stacks of open shelves, alphabetized, ready to be browsed at leisure, and drawers of archives to be opened. Maud's bookplates and their meticulous scholarship are tucked in each book's pastedown, and while they each lead to worlds of correspondence, research, Maud's life work, a visitor to the Maud/Olson Library is confronted only with spines, an assortment of titles and subject areas, browsable but almost impenetrable. Instead of examining a building brick-by-build, building on limited context to assemble a perception of the building itself, the Maud/Olson Library offers the building first, along with the experience of looking up at its immensity, experiencing the awe of that confrontation.

The gesture of open stacks in a special collection, while it may be borne of the community basis of the Maud/Olson Library and indeed, its need to operate on a smaller budget, is significant rhetorically. This experience of awe and immensity at seeing the scope of the books, yet being unable to perceive the density of their connections to each other and to other bibliographic worlds, raises the question of affective response in special collections, and even in terms of scoping knowledge as part of Olson's project. While not necessarily a predominant theoretical lens in the archival and special collections community, "the affective turn," in which "affects, emotions, and feelings are legitimate and powerful objects of critical scholarly inquiry," is gaining traction; *Archival Science*'s March 2016 special issue, edited by Marika Cifor and Anne J. Gilliland, reflects on this topic, building on the work in part of a November 2014 symposium at the University of California, Los Angeles on "Affect and the Archive" (2). In these conversations, the question of affect, or emotional experiences in archival spaces, often explores the intersection of the political and

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or possibly use an API to access metadata in innovative ways. However, despite the generative possibilities for visualizing metadata as a means of scoping special collections, there is no substitute for this present-yet-invisible materiality and the insights it holds—often just feet away from a carefully-monitored reading room.

personal, especially with questions of erasure and precarity, such as engaged endangered archives in war-afflicted communities, or interrogating LGBTQ archives for silenced histories. In this instance, we might interpret the affective experience of the Maud/Olson Library as part of the energies of Olson's own interest in the body as a site of experience, and scholarship on Olson that engages this from an affective perspective: namely, Miriam Nichol's work in *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* (2010).

In *Radical Affections*, Miriam Nichols explores the possibility of an affective approach to the New American tradition, citing Martha Nussbaum and Charles Altieri to explore the ways "that poetry may catch and hold our experience of the world as larger than ourselves" and rescue, in a way, the terms "love, cosmicity, the practice of the outside" from the "dark side of theory" in the works of Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Spicer, and Blaser (8, 18). Of Olson in particular, she states, "document plus affect: these are the coordinates of Olson's map" (269).[10] And indeed, within the Maud/Olson Library's open stacks, gazing over the thousands of spines and possibilities therein, "document plus affect" is a potent formulation not just for Olson's work, but for a library visitor seeking to make sense of the space.

This affective quality necessarily plays out across and within bodies. In the 1953 work, "The Resistance (for Jean Riboud)" Olson argues that man has to fundamentally contend with "his own physiology…it is his body that is his answer, his body intact and fought for, the absolute of his organism in its simplest terms" (*Collected Prose* 174). This process was not just theoretical for Olson: he even performed ballet at one point, taken by the critical and expressive possibilities of the body.[11]

[10] Miriam Nichols argues that "Olson holds poiesis at the level of affective response rather than that of epistemology, the better that we might tell ourselves to ourselves in our habitudes and responsibilities as a species being here, among others, on the mother rock" (Nichols, "Myth and document in *The Maximus Poems*" 36).

[11] See Karlien van de Beukel (2015). "Why Olson did ballet: the pedagogical avant-gardism of Massine." *Contemporary Olson*. pp. 286-296.

This bodily appreciation of experience itself as a site of knowledge-building is key in affect theory on the whole, and discussed to great effect by Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* (2004). She notes that affect is experienced as both biological and social phenomenon, rooted deeply in the body and altering "the biochemistry and neurology of the subject" (1). Articulating that the "transmission of affect" is "social in origin but biological and physical in effect," Brennan describes how energies are transmitted across bodies and spaces from either individuals or environment (3). She further argues that because of the permeability of affects within spaces, that this possibility "undermines the dichotomy between the individual and the environment and the related opposition between the biological and the social" (7). While still accounting for the particulars of individual experience, Brennan's work ultimately destabilizes the idea of the "self-contained Western identity" that separates the self from the "Other"—often with political consequences. This, too, constitutes an important aspect of Olson's own knowledge-building project, which he enumerates in "Human Universe" (1951) by condemning mere acts of "demonstration, a separating out, an act of classification" to constitute "a stopping," arguing that instead, "any of us, at any instant, are juxtaposed to any experience, even an overwhelming single one, on several more planes than the arbitrary and discursive which we inherit can declare" (*Collected Prose* 157). This concept—that experience need not be contained arbitrarily, since it can simultaneously stretch in manifold directions—is in part a guiding principle of the material conditions of the Maud/Olson Library itself, and part of its force as an act of knowledge production.

Considering this focus on experience, alongside Clarke's idea of "library vs. biblio," we might think of the Library as part conceptual art, part performance art that is co-created by its users as they engage in a conceptual piece that demonstrates the contours, limits, and possibilities of bibliographic knowledge. André Spears highlights this quality in his essay, "Maud/Olson and Me," noting that Maud's work does not simply function as an "Olson source library," but as a "conceptual

art installation...designed to highlight Olson's library as a space through which and around which a community or "polis" might come to life," or "an open invitation to enter a growing and evolving network of texts that would cohere as social body." It is this invitation, and the mechanisms of it, that feels most immediate to the reader upon entering the collection. The conceit of the Maud/Olson Library, with its open shelves full of rare books and periodicals that hide their bookplates (and thus conceptual worlds) within their covers, generates a provocation to the researchers that casts them as a performer: find your starting point. Which book do you pull, in this body, space, and time?

Choosing a book off a shelf is not necessarily a revolutionary act. Yet, that first choice is significant from a perspective of a reader "performing" the collection: the only way *in*, or to begin to create an understanding of the totality, is to start somewhere. And once you've pulled that first book, the network of meaning in the collection starts to reveal itself through the materiality of the book, the Maud bookplate, the secondary sources and experiences that surround the collection. But to return to the revolutionary: choosing to engage with knowledge-building in a particular way is always a political act, especially within Olson's criteria. In his opening sentence of "The Gate and the Center" (1951), Olson writes: "KNOWLEDGE either goes for the CENTER or it's inevitably a State Whore—which American and Western education generally is, has been, since its beginning" (*Collected Prose* 168). The conceptual structure of the Maud/Olson Library—as "Olson's Brain," in material form, yet a conceptual piece in and of itself—means that addressing any arc enables the reader access to a central core. This core is as unstable as the material paradox of libraries and bibliography, in which the knowledge they metonymize is located in bodies, not the books. In this capacity, each and every item may be utilized as a vector into a core of meaning—Olson's universe—and outward, into possibilities suggested by the books' very materiality.

As a study in examples, we might start with William Butler Yeats, an author that Ralph Maud pinpoints as start of Olson's critical approaches to literature and who Olson later activates in his essay, "This is Yeats Speaking." Maud notes that Olson wrote an essay for Wilbert Snow's "modern poetry course" on Yeats in 1930, and enumerates the books he was likely to have purchased as a result, including *Early Poems and Stories* (1925), *Later Poems* (1928), and *The Tower* (1928), and a poem of Yeats' that Olson had spied in *The New Republic* on October 2nd, 1929 (23). This discussion takes only a page of Maud's *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography*, but the material works of Yeats occupy far more conceptual and physical space in the Maud/Olson Library itself. In some ways, the Yeats section of the MOL illustrates Olson's own point, that books have artificial stopping points or arbitrarily-contained subjects—Maud's inventory is only a paragraph, compared to the ample shelf space Yeats occupies. However, the very materiality of the Yeats books themselves offers extensive vectors outward, a few of which I will enumerate below.

W. B. Yeats' *A Packet for Ezra Pound* (1929) is one of the first books in sequence on the shelf that contains Yeats, and Maud's bookplate indicates that the book was "used in college paper." The MOL volume is stunning, with lettered signatures and a red ink colophon that notes "four hundred and twenty-five copies of this book have been printed and published by Elizabeth Corbet Yeats on paper made in Ireland at the Cuala Press, 133 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin, Ireland. Finished in the first week of June 1929." On its flyleaf, a small penciled dollar amount remains: 250. The book is a very fine copy, first edition of Yeats: a lovely acquisition by the Maud/Olson Library, but not likely a student-grade copy. While it is ambiguous whether certain books in the Maud/Olson Library were ever read by Olson, this particular book cannot ever have been read by *anyone*: its pages remain unopened, that is, uncut at the top from their original binding. This book, as a first edition, finely bound, expensive copy of a Yeats Cuala Press printing, highlights the disparate materiality of the Maud/Olson Library as it relates to Olson himself. While the book is metonymic for Olson's

knowledge gained from it, its actual materiality suggests that it would have been physically impossible for this literally to be the case.

In this same vein, *Last Poems and Plays* (1939) by William Butler Yeats is inscribed "To mother with love from Lois / May 1940," while Maud's bookplate states "Olson took the BMC copy. Storrs." Indicating that Olson "borrowed" the Black Mountain College library version, which is now housed at University of Connecticut, Storrs, Maud's bookplate highlights the disparateness of Olson's pilfered copy with the material life of the book Maud obtained for his version of Olson's library, preserving a certain Lois's dedication to her mother. Like *A Packet for Ezra Pound*, as well as many others in the collection, this book is marked as a first American edition, printed by Macmillan in 1940. Its sale price is noted at eighty-five dollars, likely far too extravagant of a sum for Olson's ever-drained finances. This price, once again, highlights the material disparateness of Maud's first edition *library* and Olson's likely-free *bibliographic* possession of the material, after Clarke's distinction.

Indeed, the Yeats' section of the Maud/Olson Library contains a high volume of fine copy editions, many of them very good finds. Yeats' *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903), published by A. H. Bullen (on 47 Great Russell Street, London) also contains unopened signatures and unique typographic details, including page headers in the margins as opposed to the top. Yeats' *The Tower* (1928), by Macmillan and Co., Limited, on St. Martin's Street in London, has gold tooling on the cover, unopened introductory pages, deckled edges, and a penciled-in price of one hundred and five dollars. The bookplates notes "Clarke's list," a reference to Clarke's inventories of Olson's work in 1965 at 28 Fort Square, reframing this fine copy as a reference to one of the many books scattered across Olson's apartment.

Not all of Maud's acquisitions are of rare stock; while Yeats' *Autobiographies: Reveries Over Childhood and Youth and The Trembling of the Veil* was published in New York by The Macmillan Company in 1927, the flyleaf reveals the book is a library discard, last checked out on October 26,

1999 from the duPont-Ball Library of Stetson University in DeLand, Florida. And indeed, not all books in the Library are early imprints. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper's edited volume of *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, specifically the thirteenth volume that features the original 1925 version of *A Vision*, was published by Scribner in 2008. The bookplate notes that "Olson consulted the 1925 edition for his college paper." Two very different print materials, then, are substituted for each other in a symbolic manner, as evidence of Olson's reading. The 2008 date of the edition also illustrates the lifelong nature of Maud's collecting, as it signals his fifth decade of acquisitions for the project.

The presence of Maud's penciled-in annotations only augments the unique material considerations of the Library, speaking to Olson's knowledge on the one hand, and radically-differing vectors of materiality on the other (Lois's inscription, the unopened pages). In the Maud/Olson copy of *A Vision*, one of Yeats' most esoteric works for its reliance on dictation, Maud's bookplate states that the pen notes in Maud's hand were "taken from the Storrs copy," and in parentheses, he notes that half-erased pencil markings in the book belong to another owner. This copy, dated 1961 and published by Macmillan in New York, contains a flyleaf with multiple Maud annotations of Olson's notes from the Storrs copy, highlighting the interconnectedness of Olson's reading practice:

soft immortal bounces stream Euryodocles (?)

Dying each other's life, living each

other's death - Heraclitus

Leda 267 gyres

How great the gulp between

simplicity + insipidity Blake 72

discarnate (follows incarnation) 79

Olson draws out resonances and key themes in his annotations, not just for *A Vision* but with respect to his larger cosmological interests in the discarnate and immaterial versus incarnated, gyres as a Yeatsian cosmological schema, and leaps across large swathes of texts and time—Blake, Heraclitus, and the questionably spelled or identified 'Euryodocles.' While fully exploring the semantic content of the Maud/Olson annotations requires further exploration, their material presence, like the unopened pages of the Yeats or a stamped library insert, embodies the generative paradox of the Library.[12] At once pointing to an original annotation in Olson's hand, in another book in another library, the annotations now point to Maud's hand and must be reconciled alongside other (half-erased) markings, imprint details, and considerations of materiality in the books themselves. Yet, as per Clarke's formulation, they are no less a part of Olson's *bibliography*, or scope of his knowledge, because of their differing materiality. Rather, they represent almost infinite possibilities outward based on their unique material conditions—towards Olson, and also other vectors.

Postmodern Paper

Thus far, I have described the present and the history of the Maud/Olson Library, including where it is currently housed, how it began as a conceptual project whose material form exponentially expanded and challenged its scope, and how it relates to Olson's own ideas on embodiment and

[12] The annotations constitute an enormous task that requires a clear angle in, such as Charles Stein's *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum* that explores Olson's annotations of Jung's volumes in particular.

knowledge. This, however, leaves open the question of the future, or in the parlance of special collection: preservation. The question of archival proliferation goes hand in hand with preservation, since the presence of the former limits the institutional opportunities of the latter. Since the twentieth century, during which archives first became professionalized in the United States, archivists working in government, private industry, and cultural heritage institutions have faced exponentially-increasing deposits of materials. This is evidenced by the turn to "More Product, Less Process" (MPLP) processing practices, described by Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner in the 2005 issue of *The American Archivist* as necessary for institutions in the face of extreme backlogs of material that pile higher with each new acquisition. We might consider this proliferation as twofold: firstly, mass-market reprographic technologies, from the Xerox to the printer, create a proliferation of paper for an archivist to negotiate, and even the relative inexpensiveness of books during the twentieth-century often mean that an author's library contains thousands of volumes. The decreasing cost of paper goods—the stuff of books, drafts, and writing between the decline of parchment manuscripts and the rise of the personal computer—dramatically increases the possible volume of an author's collection of materials, challenging the archivist to determine what materials may be significant (and therefore worth preserving), or not.

Secondly, for many authors writing in the twentieth century, the growing consciousness of archival practice in its first century of archival professionalization and the rise of special collections acquisition budgets means that most authors born in this century are aware of their own archive, preserve it and arrange it, and often participate in the terms of its sale over the course of their lifetime. For instance, Diane di Prima had the sale of her archive brokered to the University of North Carolina Chapel-Hill containing over 53 linear feet, and various manuscripts and pieces of correspondence live in at least five other repositories in the United States. This does not compare to

her house and garage, brimming with papers, photographs, and books that she considers essential to her projects and the basis of at least a second archive to come.

This twofold aspect of archival proliferation—in terms of the paper itself, whether in manuscripts or published books, and also in terms of authors conceiving of their own archives and aiming for completion in this regard—dovetails with the postmodern question of knowledge proliferation in general, especially after the second World War. Courtesy of large-scale government funding of scientific research, the expansion of the research university system under the G.I. Bill, and the increase in availability of mass-market and personal print technologies, print knowledge was produced and disseminated at a faster rate than any historical era prior. Now, in the digital age of keyword searches, Wikipedia, and the sprawling knowledge of the Internet, we can only conceive of this information overload as big data that can be visualized, mapped, or otherwise rendered legible through a format other than its raw, sheer scope. So, the question of information overload as a postmodern condition is woven throughout archival institutions and practitioners.

Literature in the archival sciences field suggests a few avenues. One is more stringent collecting and deaccessioning policies, in which materials deemed to have little scholarly value are "weeded" from collections or not accessioned in the first place. In the case of author libraries, a challenging format with a mix of mass-market paperbacks, first editions, autographed editions, and a variety of other print forms like journals or magazines, these collections are generally on the chopping block when institutions weigh the "research value" of unannotated pulp fiction alongside Yeats first editions. Likewise, certain types of ephemera or multiple copies of items are often weeded as per best practices in most archival manuals, although items like brochures and flyers may one day prove to be valuable—as in Charles Dickens' broadsides, advertising his reading tours—should they become rare enough. In a similar vein, Andrew Stauffer's ongoing project since 2014, *Book Traces*, addresses the precarity of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century books in general stacks that are

deemed not rare enough for special preservation, and are thought to be prime candidates for digitization and deaccessioning. As an exercise in awareness and exploration, *Book Traces* encourages participants to delve into the stacks to find examples of the unique material conditions of the books, documenting their annotations and marginalia to encourage their preservation.

In the Maud/Olson Library, fine copies of Yeats sit beside pulp proto-lesbian fiction, mimeograph magazines, and archival documents. Because of the autonomy of the Library, outside an institutional repository, its conceptual project and material form are safe from what would be a damaging and obfuscating process of weeding. While I have demonstrated that especially for the Maud/Olson Library, completeness is a paradox, this ensures the Library's ability to preserve not just what *seems* significant now, but what might become significant in the future, for a variety of reasons. Given the restrictions of institutional repositories, based on budgets, backlogs, staffing, and other limitations, maintaining a community-based archive may offer the greatest flexibility for housing unique collections. However, community archives also pose specific challenges in their precariousness.

In a different vein than the mass state-endorsed destruction of archives and special collections, material precarity also occurs in places that lack institutional support in the form of budgets, endowments, trained staff, and scholarly community to make use of materials. Despite the prevalence of recommendations for developing community-based repositories as opposed to considering institutions as the be-all end-all, the practice of creating a community collection is arduous. Catalogs must be built from scratch, modified from open-source software, or purchased for not insignificant fees, staff must be trained to catalog, serve rare materials, and otherwise manage a reading room, and marketing, curriculum development, and outreach all play a key part in making the work of a community archive visible and possibly sustainable. While institutional repositories are

required to have long-term stewardship plans, few community archives can hope to do so unless they are acquired by a larger institution with the capacity to support them.

For community-based repositories, traditional modes of preservation do not always apply. For instance, the literature of collections management cautions us against sunlight, pests, food and drink, and even the handling of materials themselves. At the Maud/Olson Library, you can read on the Library's patio while drinking a beer on a sunny day. Sunlight and alcohol are not the primary threats to global archival holdings today. However, the widespread destruction of and pillaging of Iraqi archives during the United States invasion, the impact of war on institutional repositories more generally speaking, represents in our current moment a scale of cultural destruction that is totalizing and enormous. In such events, the only thing that often survives is either the secondary scholarship on items and/or their catalog records. The Maud/Olson Library's thorough catalog—digitized by Judith Nast, and available as a dataset for exploration—is available in numerous material forms and could theoretically be used to reconstruct another Maud/Olson Library at a future point. However, given the unique materiality of the current Library, a future collection would not be the same. Like a conceptual art project, this iteration of the Library, with Maud's own notes, the bibliographic particularities of the books themselves, and even its location in Gloucester, is irreplaceable.

Rebecca Knuth, in *Libricide*, states that all libraries, of any kind, are symbolic of human culture. The particulars of the Maud/Olson Library demonstrate that all books are materially-unique vectors that point towards their relationship to the library and also further afield, a concept corroborated more generally by projects such as *Book Traces*. Then, it stands that the poet's library as an archival genre is just as significant of a historical tool as an author's papers. For Olson, his library was a material collation of the type of knowledge-building that could generate a *polis*, an ideal society. Maud's scholarship collected these tools of *polis* and arranged for them to exist in a format that could truly make good on their promises, in open stacks, overlooking Gloucester Harbor. This type

of collection and curation is a model for how we might think through the archival precarities of author libraries by embracing a mode of cataloging and access that does not seek to shoehorn them in current systems of classification—as unique rare book items or part of archival papers that must be served in a reading room—but rather considers them as their own archival type, and makes them visible and available with respect for this. On the scholarly side, the best way to encourage this type of preservation and access is to develop critical methods that are well-suited to contextualize and theorize the importance of a poet's library as a cohesive project, ensuring that narratives exist about the importance of an author's books and their interconnectedness to their life and works.

With this, the material itself is only half of the story. Alcalay notes that "having the courage to take up the historical burden also means knowing how precarious and open to manipulation cultural materials are, how necessary it is not just to preserve them but to reanimate the contexts in which they were created" (17). Thus, an even more important part of collections management, beyond the handling and preservation of special collections materials, is generating comprehensive records and creating narratives in which primary sources will live on in secondary scholarship. After Alcalay's call, this chapter is an attempt to "reanimate the contexts" of the Maud/Olson Library from a variety of angles—Maud, Olson, and even my own perspective as an embodied user of the collection. In doing so, I hope to solidify a historical and critical milieu in which this collection can be legible to those who stand to benefit by seeing it—whether scholars of Olson, the subjects in his library, Maud, bibliography, special collections management, and ideas not yet contained. As Olson states in his *Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn*, "it is not how much one knows but in what field of context is retained, and used" (*Collected Prose* 298). Through Maud's scholarship, and the stewardship of those involved in the Gloucester Writers Center, we have the opportunity to dance—literally, if we wish—in some of Olson's own retained fields so that we might reanimate them, in a new millennium, for our own edification.

Chapter 2: Making Knowledge Material: Diane di Prima as Publisher and *Revolutionary Letters*

On the shelves of the Maud/Olson Library sit nine books published in the late 1960s by Poets Press, a New York City-based publishing operation founded and run by the poet Diane di Prima. These imprints feature John Ashbery, Jean Genet, Audre Lorde, Gregory Corso, David Henderson, Kirby Doyle, and di Prima's own work, with four books alone released in 1968, including an anthology of poems protesting Vietnam, titled *War Poems*, featuring Olson's own work. That same year in March, Charles Olson delivered three lectures on cosmology and belief at Beloit College in Wisconsin, titled "The Dogmatic Nature of Experience." In his lecture on the evening of March 27th, Olson elaborates on three guiding poetic principles for his work: "topos, tropos, and typos." He expands on the etymology of "typos"—"it's type, and is typology, and is typification"—to settle on a primary consequence of this word's evolution. While I explore this quote in the introduction to establish Olson and Diane di Prima's relationship through *The Floating Bear*, and indeed Poets Press, it is worth re-examining at length:

> We get our word type—which interests me, I suppose, as a writer—from it. If any of you have ever seen a piece of movable type, at the bottom is the letter and the block is above. So in that order, really, to imagine a printer doing it…he's under your words in order to make the letters of them. Which always delights me, literally, as a problem of creation. In fact, literally, I would go so far—if you will excuse my Americanism—to think that you write that way. That you write as though you were *underneath* the letters…I would think that the hoof-print of the creator is on the bottom of creation, in exactly that same sense. (42-43)

Olson here refers to publishing in a cosmological manner—the act of getting underneath letters and words in the act of printing and writing as a parallel to cosmic creation itself, in which the "hoof-print of the creator" mirrors the type of the printer. This type of perspective, in this moment in history, is significant. By 1968, decades of war were at the forefront of public consciousness, and political and social upheaval crystallized into protest movements and large-scale conflicts in the American 1960s. Getting "underneath the letters" and printing as a way to reconsider the "bottom of creation," delving into the origins of things technically and historically, was an act of resistance to the obscuring effects of mainstream knowledge structures. In her own orbit, di Prima may well have been contemplating a perspective that complemented Olson's, given the vastness of her printing and publishing projects in 1968. In addition to publishing ten Poets Press titles (Braun 10), she edited and published the thirty-fifth volume of her mimeograph journal, *The Floating Bear*, moved to California, and began composing one of her most well-known poetic works, *Revolutionary Letters*.

Getting things done in the political climate of 1968 was no small feat. In her inaugural address as Poet Laureate of San Francisco in 2012, di Prima describes how, "spurred on by the many assassinations in the news—remember? Remember 1968?—and a general sense of urgency in the air," she finally moved to a rented house in San Francisco on Oak Street (*The Poetry Deal* 6). In 1968 alone, both Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated, the Tet Offensive began in Vietnam, and the first manned spacecraft orbited the moon. The year was a watershed for di Prima personally, too. Upon her arrival in San Francisco, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Nancy Peters at City Lights forwarded her the publishing advance for the book to help her get started in the city (*The Poetry Deal* 6). She wrote between raising four children, including one-year-old Tara, and her work for the Diggers, delivering food to twenty-five communes twice a week. As she composed *Revolutionary Letters*, she mailed batches of the poems to the Liberation News Service, an anti-war

underground press stationed in New York City during the late 1960s that acted as a radical syndicate and distributed her poems to over two hundred North American newspapers (*The Poetry Deal* 7). The poems echo the rhythms of daily experience for di Prima's anarchist activism, providing accounts of the 1967 Newark Riots, dosing LSD in Tompkins Square Park, instructions on harnessing the Brahmastra, and the chemical industry's impact on global ecology. One can readily imagine their first iterations as activist performance pieces, as di Prima performed them on the steps of City Hall, "sometimes with guitar accompaniment by Peter Coyote…while my comrades handed out the *Digger Papers*, and tried to persuade office workers on their way to lunch that they should drop out and join the revolution" (*The Poetry Deal* 7-8).

First printed in 1968 by Communications Co., the publishing arm of the Diggers, *Revolutionary Letters* initially consisted of nineteen mimeographed legal-size pages and an initial thirty-four poems. The work was published by other American and British small presses until 1971, when City Lights published *Revolutionary Letters* as Pocket Poet Series #27. By then, *Revolutionary Letters* included forty-three letters, as well as six poems at the end, including "Rant from a Cool Place" and "Free City Poems." By the fourth edition, published in January of 1979, the number of letters grew to seventy, and in a fifth edition by Last Gasp press of San Francisco, up to ninety; City Lights is preparing to publish a sixth edition with di Prima's latest additions in 2019. *Revolutionary Letters* has been translated into Dutch (In de Knipscheer, 1979), and more recently, Finnish (Palladium Books, 2002). Di Prima continues to compose the poems as they come.

The subject matter in *Revolutionary Letters* is expansive, although the question of "freedom" looms large—as one could intuit from the political orientation of the work's title and its context in 1970s America. In the final poem of the second and third editions, di Prima exhorts, "free all political prisoners" ("Revolutionary Letter #63" in the third, "Revolutionary Letter #49" in the second), writing in 1971 when Living Theatre (a group that di Prima worked with in the 1960s) was

imprisoned in Brazil on marijuana charges and under threat of five years of incarceration and deportation (*Recollections* 239). In the poem, di Prima considers an alternate meaning of "free" in America—the land of the "free" that was built on slavery and colonialism—and extends the label of political prisoners first to all prisoners, then all individuals trapped in structural, mental, or spiritual apathy, and urges "Free yourself / Free yourself," then "Free me / Free me." The final line of the letter, and the whole text, is an exhortation to "DANCE" as climax and coda, reinforcing di Prima's poetic project to extend "ALL POWER TO JOY," which she takes as the primary force for realizing "we have the right to make / the universe we dream" ("Revolutionary Letter #50").

The way in which di Prima frames joy as a vehicle for revolution directly contrasts the grim intellectual and political order that characterized post-World War Two United States culture. This stems from di Prima's own experience, an object of reflection in her inaugural address as the Poet Laureate of San Francisco:

> I grew up in the world of McCarthy, of the death of the Rosenbergs and of Wilhelm Reich, of endless witch-hunts. I remember to this day where I was sitting—it was on the steps of the New School for Social Research—when I got the news that the Rosenbergs had been executed. I was 18. I had dropped out of college that year, and was living on the Lower East Side. (*The Poetry Deal* 3)

Di Prima's commitment to poetry as "the guiding force in [her] life" often ran up against the "witch-hunt" of American political life. A copy of her mimeograph magazine, *The Floating Bear*, was sent to Harold Carrington in prison and ran afoul of censors, causing her and LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) to be arrested on obscenity charges in 1961 (Phillips and Clay 75). Before this, di Prima at eighteen, alone in New York City, was already living a lifestyle that was highly uncommon for

women then, and even today. In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, di Prima writes, "choosing to be an artist…in the world I grew up in, the world of the 40s and early 50s, was choosing as completely as possible for those times the life of the renunciant," which was for di Prima a role that fostered power and momentum in her own exploration of knowledge and experience outside mainstream culture (101).

Di Prima's identification as "renunciant" poet continues even today, and is particularly significant given her historical context. Jed Rasula, in the *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990*, argues that poetry's "dominant condition…in the second half of the twentieth century is its subsistence in administrative environments," from New Criticism to Associated Writing Programs (68). By contrast, di Prima's institutional affiliations are with her ideas and community; she has described New York City as her "school" or "university" during her first decades as poet (*The Poetry Deal* 5). Thus, di Prima's writing in *Revolutionary Letters* thus explores a political agenda that is not only countercultural in its content, but in its composition, publishing, and critical reception. During its first three years in mimeographed form, the importance of this physical form can best be appreciated by understanding *Revolutionary Letters* alongside *The Floating Bear* and di Prima's other printing projects. Examining the synergy of her printing practices through the overarching lens of *Revolutionary Letters* not only reveals the political dimensions of di Prima's poetics and publishing, but also how her work allows us to imagine ways to intervene in literary history that exists outside academic or formal institutions.

The political context of these poems and their publication is important to our understanding of them, in part because it highlights ways that they have escaped more formal attention in literary studies. Rasula discusses the lasting influence of New Criticism on knowledge organization in the twentieth-century, observing that New Criticism as a scholarly practice, which focused on close-reading and hermeneutics, was an institution in its own right that governed academic presses,

journals, scholarship, and the creation of poetry itself. Quoting Malcolm Cowley, Rasula notes that "the consequence of the New Critical reactionary disposition was to 'separate an intelligent sector of the American population from political interest' and isolate poetry into tight containers of interpretation, as opposed to meaning in the world" (80). By contrast, Andrei Codrescu describes *Revolutionary Letters* as a snapshot of America's attempt to make "its first world-wide bid for a merger between a collapsing economy and the Apocalypse," showing that these particular poems have no political choice *but* to be in the world, shaping and influencing the perception of history as it was made in the 1960s and 1970s ("Poetry that Stays News"). Di Prima's view of poetry, shaped by her early years in Manhattan running Poets Theatre and participating in a dynamic scene of dance, performance, painting, and poetry, holds that the art she and her contemporaries created "existed beyond the studio, the typewriter, the apartment…that it—even briefly—changed the world" (*Recollections* 147). The genuineness and reality of this type of poetry—meant to be sung on the steps of city hall, or shared via mimeograph as fuel for anger or consolation—thumbs its nose at the idea of poetry as a solely hermeneutic practice and calls for radical transformation of life itself.

This difference may account for the obscurity and misinterpretations of *Revolutionary Letters* in academic audiences and with poets affiliated with these audiences, such as Ron Silliman's dismissal of the later poems of Ed Dorn in *Way Out West* as "rank[ing] up there with Diane DiPrima's [sic] *Revolutionary Letters* as the silliest when it comes to their actual political thinking" (Silliman). Silliman's oversight reflects the patronization of plain speech as an outcropping of the New Critical mode that Rasula cites. Even further, Silliman's association with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, and the incident of the "Poetry Wars" where Robert Duncan seized the stage from Barrett Watten during a 1978 talk on Louis Zukofsky, reflects a larger schism between the vocabularies of poets associated with academe and poets like Diane di Prima, who forge their own structures of meaning with embodied grounding in political realities, rather than seek

conceptual projects divorced from this. Thus, Silliman's oversight reflects not on di Prima's accomplishment with *Revolutionary Letters*, but on how the text—not to mention di Prima's work on the whole—outsmarts a realm of academic poetry that seeks to control and cauterize the bleeding edge of lived experience and radical poetics. This is part of Alcalay's observation that di Prima has refused to give over the "paradoxical complexities of plain language"—a significant act in a critical milieu that uses "specialized terminologies that attempt to control things that might defy control" (210).

By elaborating on di Prima's relationship to overarching institutional structures of poetry, I do not seek to place her within one, or shoehorn her poetics into a paradigm that is necessarily comfortable for academic audiences. In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, she makes clear the importance of her own abdication of formal academic education at the age of nineteen, giving up "the notion of college degrees" to pursue poetry. This was a firm choice, despite her extensive coursework as a student in New York City, and also due to the economic realities of her father refusing to fund a formal degree after she left Swarthmore (*Recollections* 110). With this, we have much to learn by noting how thoroughly di Prima's work has always existed strictly outside academic structures, with both political and personal elements, informed by a wide range of knowledge traditions. While di Prima has always been part of poetry's counterculture—first with her association with the Beats in the 1950s, continuing with her activist work with the Diggers in the 1960s, as well as her lifelong study of Buddhism and devotion to writing and teaching outside academic and institutional context—the way her poetics underscore this is instrumental in our understanding of how significant her contribution to twentieth-century poetics is. One of the primary ways that this becomes legible is by zooming in on specific moments that make vivid the alchemy of di Prima's publishing practices, poetry, and community involvement.

The richness of *Revolutionary Letters'* publishing history, especially in its understudied first three years as a mimeograph publication, encourages us to do just that, especially when viewed alongside contemporaneous publishing projects such as *The Floating Bear* and indeed, independent publishing in 1960s America more broadly. In this chapter, I will situate di Prima's work as a publisher and printer, especially as it relates to her editorial and print work on *The Floating Bear*, as essential context for the early publishing history of *Revolutionary Letters*. In particular, I will discuss how *Revolutionary Letters* in its first three years allows us to draw together numerous characteristics of di Prima's work, including the interrelatedness of printing and poetry, her operations outside traditional knowledge structures, and also her belief that poetry belongs in the world as a device of community. This foundation will lay the groundwork for the subsequent two chapters, which will continue to address how *Revolutionary Letters* challenges or refigures Cold War structures of knowledge alongside the political and material implications of poets working against these systems. But first: an initial look at how publishing fulfills some of the more radical promises of di Prima's work, and how this background allows us to understand *Revolutionary Letters* for its political and poetic nature.

Di Prima as Publisher in 1960s: *The Floating Bear* and Poets Press

In *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side*, Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips create an exhaustive inventory of the so-called "mimeograph revolution," or the explosion of poet-run small presses and publications in postwar America. In the preface to this work, poet Jerome Rothenberg traces the importance of self-publication to the very identity of poetry from Walt Whitman's self-published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, through the "writers who sought new ways & languages" and "took charge of their own publication," like Gertrude Stein, alongside poet-run and non-commercial presses from Black Sun to early New Directions (10). After this heyday, he notes how the era after

the Holocaust and the Cold War marked a newly fragmented world of poetry, courtesy of the scarcity and censorship climates created by McCarthyism and New Criticism as well as commercial publishing practices that only elevated few voices. Against this backdrop, he demonstrates how "the actual topography of the new poetry (circa 1960) was at a necessary distance from the commercial hub of American publishing," and newly possible thanks to cheap rents and newly affordable printing technologies, including mimeographs, ditto, Xerox, photocopy, and offset presses. Rothenberg's preface underscores "the lesson of the works presented here [in *A Secret Location*] is the reminder of what is possible where the makers of the works seek out the means to maintain & fortify their independence" (11). And indeed, Clay and Phillips enumerate over one hundred such examples of this type of publication, including di Prima's *The Floating Bear* and Poets Press, as well as Totem Press, who published her first work (that she had already prepared and typeset with another printer who backed out), alongside other highlights—Oyez Press, *Yugen*, *Semina*, *Fuck You, a magazine of the arts*, *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, *The Black Mountain Review*, *Evergreen Review*, Grove Press, and New Directions (*Recollections* 183).

Thus, after Rothenberg's characterization, self-publication and independent modes of publishing in Cold War America were political gestures—refusals to edit poetic language to fit the mold of commercial or university life. For di Prima, publishing and poetry have been intertwined since she first used a multilith press at Columbia University, working in their Electronic Research Lab. She describes the experience mystically, comparing herself to a "bee tasting a hundred kinds of flowers" (*Recollections* 114). Later, while learning the entire workflow of publishing from Aardvark Press who agreed to publish her debut book, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward*, if she did the typesetting and printing, she describes being "caught up in the wonder of offset printing" and "hooked, though [she] didn't realize it" on the process (*Recollections* 182-3). In her lecture as Poet Laureate of San Francisco, she reflects how "poetry led me to…learn offset printing and raise the

money to buy my Fairchild-Davidson press," and how she "was very proud of it. It came secondhand with a week of printing classes" (*The Poetry Deal* 5). In her speech, di Prima also notes how poetry led her to visit Ezra Pound, study Greek, and start the New York Poets Theatre; thus, printing exists in a milieu of understanding poetic lineage and performance, an integral part of the craft itself.

Of di Prima's printing projects, which over the years have notably included Poets Press and Eidolon Editions, *The Floating Bear* is perhaps one of the most influential and well-known mimeographs from the 1960s. From 1961 to 1971, first in New York City and then in San Francisco, Diane di Prima did much of the publishing and editing of *The Floating Bear* alongside Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones). Di Prima describes the birth of the *Bear* as the result of a visit from LeRoi Jones, who had big plans for the Gestetner mimeograph at Larry Wallrich's Phoenix Book Shop, used for "flyers and political handouts, posters and broadsides," and the "actual catalogues that kept the place running." Jones suggested a "literary newsletter," hatched with an initial mailing list of one hundred and twenty individuals from di Prima's and Jones' address books (*Recollections* 244). The *Bear* was unparalleled at the time in speed and scope: seventeen issues were generated within the first year of its publication, with a total of twenty-eight issues by 1963 (Phillips and Clay 29). The quicksilver form took the "news" part of "newsletter" seriously in the way that it accelerated the poetic velocity of the time; each issue was mailed for free to a select but wide-ranging list of poets, with the enterprise running on sweat and donations, until the last few issues, by which time distribution exceeded thousands of copies and di Prima requested an advance on postage (di Prima and Baraka xii). In an interview published as the introduction to the Laurence McGilvery 1973 publication of the complete run of *The Floating Bear*, published in La Jolla, California, di Prima recounts printing "250 copies" to "117 names we had gotten out of our address books," and henceforth, "anybody who asked for the Bear got put on the list" (di Prima and Baraka vii, xii).

Through this rapid pace and networked array of readers, new poetry emerged. Di Prima recounts that "nearly everything that appeared in the Bear was published there for the first time," excepting novel additions: "King James VI or Ma Rainey," even a "long piece by Grosseteste" (di Prima and Baraka viii). After 1963, LeRoi Jones resigned and di Prima continued on with a slightly irregular publication schedule to complete a total of thirty-eight issues (Phillips and Clay 75).

The printing structure of *The Floating Bear* was built for speed; "*Bears* got one staple each in the upper left-hand corner, and then they got folded in half for the mailing labels," di Prima recounts in *Recollections* (253). She did most of the typesetting "onto green plastic Gestetner mimeograph stencils with [her] ancient, heavy IBM typewriter," working through the painstaking process of correcting stencils after the proofreading process with Jones and Jimmy Waring (*Recollections* 252). The *Bear* features no illustrated covers until its twenty-eighth issue (a line drawing on Santa Claus on the toilet reading Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*). The thirtieth issue of the *Bear* is a drawing by a young Jeanne, di Prima's daughter, with abstract dashes and kinesthetic lines. At the same time, the covers expanded to include art in conversation with the poetry; the 1969 thirty-seventh edition features a cover by Wallace Berman ("Wally" in *The Floating Bear* header) from his Verifax collage series, with the iconic image of a hand holding a transistor radio repeated four times and superimposed with Hebrew letters. However, most of the issues feature a simple header, with issue number, space for a mailing label, and brief masthead that gets right to the poems themselves on the very first page.

This unprecedented speed created community and poetic dialogue across geographic locations, fostering conversation between groups writing at Black Mountain College, in San Francisco, and New York City. In a 1962 letter to LeRoi Jones, Robert Duncan writes, "it's the grace of The Floating Bear that poetry becomes "news" and I read thru to satisfy the crude avidity to

know what is happening."[13] In a letter from Bill Berkson to di Prima on September 9th, 1974, he references the collected *Floating Bear*, raving "how fresh most of it looks, & that incredible bulk! How about a mega-reading of the whole book, by 40-50 poets, non-stop, _ hours, through the years?"[14] Leaving an underscore instead of hazarding a guess as to the total hours that the *Bear* would take to read aloud—perhaps even years, as the next clause of his sentence suggests, Berkson gestures to the vast scope of community that di Prima generated in her editorial and print work for the newsletter.

This type of publication filled a significant gap in communication between poets, as well as the publishing industry at the time. Clay and Phillip's short essay "A Little History of the Mimeograph Revolution," foregrounds how many of the poets who appeared in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, had "barely" been formally published, existing on the margins of the mainstream literary community, but had "of necessity…invented their own communities and audiences…with a small press or little magazine often serving as the nucleus of both" (14). *The Floating Bear*, along with Diane di Prima's Poets Press, were both small-press answers to the need for poetry that was not hierarchically distributed or institutionally endorsed—"*The Floating Bear* had no subscription rate, and which you couldn't buy anywhere for any amount of money, though you got a free subscription if you asked and we liked you"—but rather reflective of the greater range of poetry that emerged from verse beyond the academy (*Recollections* 382). The speed of the *Bear* matched, or even created the conditions for a contemporaneous study of poetics. Di Prima notes "the techniques of poetry were changing very fast, and our sense of the urgency of getting the technological advances of say, Olson, into the hands of, say, Creeley, within two weeks, back and forth, because

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[13] Duncan, Robert Edward. A.L.S. to LeRoi Jones, San Francisco, Feb. 17, 1962. 3 p. Manuscript box. The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
[14] Box 167, Berg Uncatalogued Manuscripts. The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

the thing just kept growing at a mad rate out of that" (di Prima and Baraka x-xi). The instant gratification of the era of the internet makes distant memory the geographic and creative isolation that existed in the 1950s and 1960s, and the breakneck speed of seventeen newsletters in the first year alone of the newsletter is almost certainly unmatched in the history of literary magazine distribution before the Internet. In this capacity, *The Floating Bear* predates and anticipates many do-it-yourself publishing forms that poets use today, from zine to blog, that give rise to new "technologies" of poetry themselves.

In a letter from Robert Creeley to Diane di Prima, dated March 12, 1974, he thanks di Prima for sending along the collected *Floating Bear*, then recently published, and describes how he used it to teach later that day:

> I wanted to thank you for having that lovely substantial run of Floating Bears sent me, really impressive and terrific to have in hand like that. I got it just before going in to teach, so slapped it down on the table and said, don't ever no one ask me again 'how do I get published' —viz, LOOK. Ok. It was, again, so lovely to go through and witness again how much you literally got done.[15]

Creeley, whose own work founding *The Black Mountain Review* and running Divers Press testifies to the importance of the *Bear's* legacy—not just for the purpose it served at the time, to share poetry at top speed and generate community in the process, but for the evidence it provides on how poetry *happened* outside of institutional context in Cold War America. Creeley's students, at the University of Buffalo where he taught and ran the Charles Olson Memorial Lecture series, would likely have been

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[15] Box 167, Berg Uncatalogued Manuscripts. The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

experiencing the constricting effect that commercial publishing and academic centrality had on poetry publishing in the 1970s, when this letter was written. Perhaps the immensity of a complete edition of all *Bear* issues might have set off a spark: publishing can always be in the poet's own hand.

The Floating Bear created poetic community where geography and the institutionalized structures for poetry and poetic knowledge had dispersed it, but community also literally created the *Bear*. While di Prima was frequently at the helm, she also welcomed guest editors, from Alan Marlowe to Kirby Doyle, John Wieners, Bill Berkson, and Allen De Loach. In the *Bear*'s early years, she and Jones would host parties for printing, collating, and mailing mimeographs, dividing up the variety of tasks necessary to create the physical publication (Phillips and Clay 75). Di Prima also collaborated on magazines beyond the *Bear*, serving as guest editor of *Yugen* and *Kulchur*, a fact which further reinforces the collective composition and distribution of the independent publishing scene in downtown New York during the 1960s (Phillips and Clay 89). In each facet of the *Bear's* editing, production, and reception, the idea of *use* for people pervaded.

The sheer effort of printing so many issues of *The Floating Bear* at such a speed was tremendous, not to mention the mailing list itself—di Prima bets that the people on the list "moved on the average at least once a year" (di Prima and Baraka xii). Likewise, di Prima accounted for the cost and volume of the enterprise, noting that "by the end of the first year we were up to 500 copies, and by the time of the last few issues we were printing 1500 and mailing out 1250," with the reserved two hundred fifty issues for international distribution; by the last issue, the print run had expanded to two thousand copies (di Prima and Baraka xii). However, during the era of *The Floating Bear*, di Prima was also publishing with Poets Press, starting in 1965 with an edition A. B. Spellman's *The Beautiful Days*, introduced by Frank O'Hara. Building on the production skills she learned with LeRoi and Hettie Jones on *Yugen* and Totem Books, di Prima assembled "a print shop on the lower East Side," where she also published issues of the *Bear*, to give Poets Press its footing (*Recollections*

218, McGilvrey xvi). Poets Press published the works of Audre Lorde, Michael McClure, Herbert Huncke, as well as Timothy Leary's *Psychedelic Prayers* in 1966 at Millbrook, and works by John Ashbery (in the unique form of holograph reproduction, as opposed to typesetting print) (Phillips and Clay 89). In her archival work on Poets Press, Jolie Braun notes that eight of the almost thirty Poets Press titles were newly-published poets, including Audre Lorde and David Henderson, and the press's catalog spans a wide array of literary genres, including the Black Arts movement, Black Mountain, the San Francisco Renaissance, the New York School, and the Beats (7). In spanning these genres, di Prima's work challenges these very categories, reminding us that poets in this era did not necessarily see genre or geographic divides in the way that current literary studies defines them.

To start the press, she purchased a letterpress: "I bought a Davidson 241 and put it in a storefront…I went to 'printing school' for a week and learned how to run the machine (I was the only woman in the class), and I got on with it" (Phillips and Clay 89). Creeley's statement, "don't ever no one ask me again 'how do I get published' —viz, LOOK" highlights the quintessential di Prima attitude—work needs to get out in the world, di Prima finds the tools and sets to it. Subtly, her account of learning to use a letterpress foregrounds another radical aspect of her publishing: not many women, if any, worked as centrally as di Prima did in the editorial and printing community of New York City in the 1960s. Her voice as an editor and publisher is therefore that much more important and distinct, for the perspective this brings.

Poets Press, while technically a small press, operated on an influential scale in its cultural milieu. Jolie Braun notes that its books were mentioned in underground magazines, "*LA Free Press*, *Olé*, *Margins*, *Quixote*, *The Berkeley Barb*, and *The Paper*," as well as the National Foundation of the Arts and Humanities, who provided di Prima with three grants (15). Braun uncovers critical archival information on this relationship in an August 2, 1967 letter to di Prima from the Foundation, which acknowledges her work in foregrounding "authors of significant works who have difficulty in being

published through the usual commercial channels," acknowledging its efforts "in advancing the cause of the unknown, obscure or difficult writer, and in the publication of books visually and typographically distinctive, thereby helping to advance the cause of the best in American art" (Ted Wilentz Collection, Box 1, Folder 2)" (Braun 15). Adding to the reach of the Press, some titles remain in print today through other publishers, such as Timothy Leary's *Psychedelic Prayers* (Braun 19).

Brenda Knight, in *Women of the Beat Generation*, underscores di Prima's role as a publisher, noting "Diane di Prima, considered by many to be the archetypal Beat woman, started her own press rather than wait for a publisher to come knocking" (2). While di Prima reflects on the difficulties of creating and sharing art in the 1950s, asking "how to carve a niche for it, if one doesn't have access to galleries, to publishing houses? How make a place if one doesn't speak the language of the critic?" she has captured significant interest in her lifetime from publishers such as Penguin, who printed *Loba* and *Recollection of My Life as a Woman* (*Recollections* 198). Knights' statement oversimplifies, if not mischaracterizes, *why* di Prima developed a deep relationship to printing and printing technologies, since she was not holding out by any means for traditional representation of her or her colleagues' work. It is not, as Knight might indicate, solely because there is an absence of major publisher interest but rather because the primary value of the work is not in legibility as a "famous" publication by a larger publisher, but in the poet's ability to write and print for herself, in her time, in her community.

Di Prima describes her relationship with printing as spiritual work that emanates from a past life, especially through the rhythms of working on *The Floating Bear*:

> There was something familiar about it, almost as if I had, as I later wrote that I had, been a printer in some other time. As if from the beginning of printing in Europe, I had been there for it, been a part of it, that's how it felt. (*Recollections* 253)

Likewise, di Prima cites "the anarchist dream of being a printer had long been in me," as a result of her anarchist grandfather Domenico Mallozzi, to whom *Revolutionary Letters* is dedicated (*Recollections* 410, Braun 11). Jolie Braun highlights a 1965 journal entry of di Prima's at the University of Louisville's special collections that states, "I shall type and write and print—Printing books shall eventually be my trade" (Braun 11, Diane di Prima Papers, 1934-1992, Box 7 Folder 5). Di Prima's devotion to the craft and community of printing highlights how for her, poetry is not a retreat from but instead a full commitment to life.

This full commitment is particularly vivid in light of her relationship with printing technologies. In "Revolutionary Letter #9," di Prima suggests a new approach for money: "mimeograph it and everyone / print as much as they want /and see what happens." This applies the publishing protocol of *The Floating Bear* to a radical economic possibility, in which the mimeograph is not a technology for centralized, top-down, or hierarchical distribution, but a tool for community and rhizomatic sharing. This call to print money and "see what happens" is not only a gesture to theoretical and conceptual structures of what the world *could* be, but based in her experiences in the Diggers, during which she kept the Diggers' Free Bank, a rotating shoebox with money that was available to anyone who needed it, on top of her refrigerator. In her lecture as Poet Laureate of San Francisco, she revisits the premise of "Revolutionary Letter #9," remembering "the shoebox was full for at least six months that I know of, which is proof enough for me that such institutions are possible…we might as well print our own money and forget about them, about banks" (10). For di Prima, the mimeograph is not just a tool of publication, but a way to print new conditions for life.

The penultimate issue of *The Floating Bear*, Number 37, was "deliberately" influenced by di Prima's time on the West Coast, and she stamped "a whole bunch" of this issue with the word

"Free" and left copies at "the Third Eye bookstore on Haight Street because [she] thought the people of the City of San Francisco should have it…the whole free city thing was going strong then," referencing the Diggers (di Prima and Baraka xviii). Di Prima notes that by 1970, she knew that the era of the *Bear* was over, and the final issue of the magazine was a collaboration with Allen De Loach's *Intrepid* magazine in Buffalo (di Prima and Baraka xviii).

While di Prima continued to edit *The Floating Bear* through 1971, her move to California inaugurated a huge shift in her daily life and poetics. Di Prima describes the move to California in 1968 as a manifestation of "the possibility of actualizing some of the dreams I'd absorbed from my anarchist grandfather…the chance to actually *act* on what I believed in, to take a shot at creating the world as we dreamed it" alongside groups like the Diggers, Panthers, Zenies, and "out-riders and rebels of all sorts" that were working in the Bay area at the time (*The Poetry Deal* 11). An advance from City Lights for an in-progress *Revolutionary Letters* helped establish her new life in San Francisco, along with friendship from Lew Welch, Michael and Joanna McClure, editors of *The Oracle*, and other counterculture poets and communities in the Bay area.

The first published form of *Revolutionary Letters* is closely aligned with the Diggers, the anarchist organization that di Prima worked with in San Francisco known for the "Free Store," and broadsides including "Free City" that were named after the seventeenth-century British political collective that sought to farm on common land. Communications Co., the publishing arm of the Diggers, published *Revolutionary Letters* in 1968 on nineteen mimeographed pages with the first thirty-four poems of the series. As mimeographs, these publications vary, yet one of these copies at the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library (dated 1968, no publisher attribution) is thrice-stapled along the paper's edge like a book, printed on 8 ½" by 14" paper.[16] The poems are titled "Revolutionary Letters" followed by a

[16] Berg Uncatalogued Manuscripts. Diane di Prima, "Revolutionary Letters."

number, which becomes "Revolutionary Letter" followed by a number in later editions to give each poem a missive-like feel. A copy located with Bolerium Books in San Francisco shows crease marks of the 1968 edition folded into thirds, as if it was tucked in a shirt or pants pocket. The materiality of this edition evokes a rough-and-ready poetic manual for the revolution, designed for easy distribution and portability (ABE Books Listing).[17] Of course, considering *The Floating Bear*, which was often folded and stamped as its own envelope, and likewise mimeographed and distributed for maximum possible sharing, di Prima had been working in this type of print environment and ethos for the better part of a decade.

The final page of 1968 Communications Co. printing contains a postscript that was typical of other printings of *Revolutionary Letters* before the City Lights edition in 1971: "The Revolutionary Letters are free poetry and may be reprinted by everyone. More of them will be printed as they are written" (Berg Uncatalogued Manuscripts). True to the promises of this inscription, in keeping with the Free Store, Free Bank, and other resources of the Diggers, these poems rejected initial copyright in favor of wider, exuberant distribution. An edition published in 1968 by the Poetry Project at St Mark's Church, continues states: "Free poems. No copyright. May be reprinted by anyone" and a hand-drawn cover, featuring letters one through twenty-seven over eleven leaves.[18] Since *Revolutionary Letters*' initial publisher, Communications Co., was the publishing organization of the

[17] While ABE Books might not readily be considered a scholarly resource or citation, it is an invaluable tool for examining a variety of available texts outside special collections finding aids and catalogs—and further, gives a sense of these items as what they have been and are, which is circulating literary works that are not all defined and set within institutional context but part of circulation, the market, and in-process when it comes to collector valuations and institutional acquisitions. ABE Books makes vivid that these works are, in fact, still dynamic and in circulation.
[18] WorldCat, http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/49108953. An edition that is likely part of the St. Mark's distribution is illustrated with side-stapled wrappers and printed in black (Derringer Books, Massachusetts, https://www.abebooks.com/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=13473862562&searchurl=tn%3Drevolutionary%2Bletters%26sortby%3D17%26an%3Ddiane%2Bdi%2Bprima).

Diggers collective, this type of inscription and also the Diggers and their style of publication—free, often mimeographed, and politically-minded—had particular influence on di Prima's work. For instance, early printed sheets by the Diggers in 1966 such as "Let Me Live in a World Pure," are printed in a minimalist, mimeographed, broadside style, featuring text that has certain affinities with di Prima's "Revolutionary Letter #49" (second and fourth editions) in their shared engagement of popular references, anaphora, and radical political inclinations.

> When will BOB DYLAN quit working on Maggie's Farm?
> When will RALPH GLEASON realize he is riding in a Hearst?
> When will TIMOTHY LEARY stand on a streetcorner waiting for no one?
> ("Let Me Live in a World Pure," Early Diggers Sheet 1966)
>
> Free Julian Beck
> Free Timothy Leary
> Free seven million starving in Pakistan
> Free all political prisoners
> ("Revolutionary Letter #63")

Because of Communications Co.'s copyright statement (or lack thereof), *Revolutionary Letters,* other printers reproduced and distributed the work in its early years. A second 1968 printing occurred in Ann Arbor by the Artists Workshop Press, in an edition of five hundred copies with seventeen leaves each bound and stapled in light orange and black paper. In 1969, in London, Long Hair Books also published an edition of thirty-four of the letters, with black lettering on white papers and a blue wrapper that ages to an olive color. These first editions mark the prehistory of a more traditionally published and bound book, instead designating a text that was meant to be read, shared, discussed, and used.

The ultimate *usefulness* and community orientation of *Revolutionary Letters* is part of its poetic core: in the foreword to *Pieces of a Song*, Robert Creeley describes di Prima's "search for human center" as "among the most moving [he had] witnessed," and that "she took her friends with her, though often it would have been simpler indeed to have gone alone" (vii). The publishing history of

Revolutionary Letters reflects a strong interest in building poetic community—as performances on City Hall steps, as dispatches to radical news outlets, as freely-distributed mimeographs, and then as part of the "Pocket Poets" editions in City Lights. In particular, this communal aspect is evidence in the epistolary mode of the letters—as opposed to poems—themselves, as embedded in both their titles and poetics.

The mimeograph revolution placed new poets in conversation through edited issues and new publications, and letters mailed between poets were crucial alternatives, addendums, and even acts of poetry in their own right. The importance of letters to poetry made its way into poetry itself; Charles Olson intended his *The Maximus Poems*, one of his most monumental poetic works in both volume and scope, as letters to the anarchist poet and community organizer Vincent Ferrini, situating the poems as local and intimate with Gloucester (Maud, *Selected Letters*). Berkeley Renaissance poet Jack Spicer's visionary *After Lorca* features "translations" accompanied by letters to and from the deceased Lorca himself, situating correspondence not as an act to generate a local community, but in Yeatsian style to facilitate contact with other realms of being. Given also the great amount of poetic thought exchanged in letters during the 1940s through 1960s—as the postal service was both cheap and private (at the time, largely) for geographically isolated poets working in the postwar era, the epistolary form gestures to an enormous archival body as well as literary genre (the "Collected Letters" are often just as important as the "Collected Works" for poets of this generation). We might consider letters, then, as "semifossilized remnant of an ancient time," noting the significant cultural differences between their historical moment and our own, despite their immediacy (Libby 61). More metaphorically, we might consider *Revolutionary Letters* a type of poetic "amber" that crystallizes not just historical context but also practices of poetic transmission that rose in the 1960s.

In this way, the form of this text is also part of its revolution—instead of a doctrine, a constitution, a manifesto, these are letters or notes, which rely heavily on second person and first

person plural pronouns. In some of the first letters, this practice animates information such as "they turned off the water / in the 4th ward for a whole day during the Newark riots" with a new urgency, defining a clear "they" of political opposition with the intimacy of hearing a message from a friend ("Revolutionary Letter #3). When di Prima exhorts:

> don't let them lure you
> to Central Park everytime, I would hate
> to stumble bloody out of that park to find help:
> Central Park West, or Fifth Avenue, which would you
> Choose?
> ("Revolutionary Letter #8)

she places the "you" within the context of the poem itself, drawing in the reader to imagine how their political practices can be re-envisioned with strategy: she makes vivid for the reader just how apathetic the affluent residential area around Central Park would be to revolutionary struggle. In this style of writing, the inhabitable "you" of the reader/poetic audience joins the ranks of *Revolutionary Letters*' dizzying array of people, places, and subjects, all of which provide historical context and occasion for revolutionary thought—Peabody Coal, Cheyenne land, Charles Olson, Timothy Leary, urban renewal, Dow Chemical. The combination of a countercultural roll-call with the readerly "you" makes the practical tone of many of these letters, particularly in the first handful, particularly insightful. The letters are like arrows—they proceed with a defined target, the "you," and offer historical context, hands-on advice, and multidimensional approaches to the concept of revolution to hit their mark.

As the work progresses, di Prima invokes an inhabitable, inclusive "we" for solidarity in "Revolutionary Letter #50," where she names multiple occulted traditions for their revolutionary powers:

> What we need to know is laws of time & space
> they never dream of. Seek out
> the ancient texts: alchemy
> homeopathy, secret charts

of early Rosicrucians (Giordanisti).
Grok synchronicity Jung barely
scratched the surface of.
LOOK TO THE "HERESIES" of EUROPE FOR
BLOODROOT
(remnants of pre-colonized pre-Roman Europe)
("Revolutionary Letter #58)

In this excerpt, the "they" is much like the "them" that would be unreliable help if a protester were to flee Central Park ("Revolutionary Letter #8")—"they" cannot understand the importance of alchemical knowledge in conceiving differently of time and space, not even in the act of dreaming. Beyond the first-person plural and the epistolary form, the way in which di Prima prescribes occult texts as antidote to linear time makes implicit an argument: there is historical precedence and evidence for reconsidering the nature of and our relationship to time itself. That re-examining our reliance on linear time is not just a task of collective imagination but rather an object of study, a topic requiring research, familiarity, and application—as well as the attention of community in shared effort.

But the realms of transmission for di Prima are not strictly interpersonal—her intention to harness "ALL LEVELS" of being requires participation in other realms beyond the known world and human experience. Beyond the texts and bodies of knowledge (or readers) that di Prima cites, she notes that dreaming is another way *in*—another approach to understanding a new and revolutionary sense of the self in relation to cosmicity: "what we need to know is laws of time & space / they never dream of." Returning to "Revolutionary Letter #50," in which di Prima states "we have the right to make / the universe we dream," the practice of *dreaming* is not idly fantasizing or escaping reality but reinscribing a connection to lived experience on a deeper, spiritual level.

In his *Beloit Lectures*, Olson aligns dreaming as a type of language itself—"your own dreams, which I consider completely a language, if you know how to read it" (*Charles Olson: Poetry and Truth* 46). Likewise, Jack Kerouac kept dream notebooks that eventually formed *Book of Dreams*, drawing

on eight years of journals from 1952-1960. Only half a century prior, Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) suggested a theory of the unconscious mind and its relationship to dreaming; once, meaning was located outside of people, and after Freud, meaning became located within. For the poet, one might represent this dichotomy on the one hand as Jack Spicer's "Poetics of the Outside," in which the poet receives "Martian" radio transmissions, or even William Butler Yeats' process of taking dictation from his wife, Georgie, for *A Vision* (a tale that both Olson and Spicer tell in various lectures). And on the other, devotion to dreams, meditation, "to contact ALL LEVELS of one's own being" ("Revolutionary Letter #45") represents a different type of poetic intuition, one that di Prima has practiced with increasing frequency during her life.

Dreaming, for di Prima, is a project of subconscious understanding of self, poetic knowledge, and a practice of dictation—clearing channels for spiritual experience. In the 1970s, when *Revolutionary Letters* was expanding over the course of its City Lights editions, di Prima began an extensive practice of keeping large, intricately collaged dream notebooks. Labeled in her archival holdings as the "San Francisco Notebooks" and dating from August 1971, these notebooks featured transcripts of her dreams, fragments of poetry, collages for new moon and full moon phases, photographs of her children, marks for casting the I Ching, and writing that resulted from her divination practices. These artifacts serve as material evidence that dreaming, for di Prima, was an intensive poetic methodology that she developed at length over the course of the writing of *Revolutionary Letters* and also her other poetry from this decade. Her relationship with Charles Olson, which she explores in her "Charles Olson Memorial Lectures" at the University of Buffalo, share that he visited her in dreams after his death, continuing their mutual exploration of history, poetics, and Gloucester.

Returning to the language of the poem, the inability to even "dream of" occulted historical knowledge, to consider time and space apart from a scientific or progressive understanding, is no

small insult—in di Prima's revolutionary cosmology, it's the restriction of an activity designed to unlock the most profound and far-reaching truths. This inability to dream connects back to di Prima's exhortation, "ALL POWER / TO JOY. which will remake the world," in which joy does not constitute a superficial emotional state but rather a deeply informed principle, crafted consciously by rejecting dominant systems of oppression and control ("Revolutionary Letter #50"). "Revolutionary Letter #58" echoes this conception of joy, although contextualizes it further as a byproduct or result of having obtained and engaged occulted spiritual knowledge:

> Insistent, hopeful resurgence of communards
> free love & joy; "in god all things are common"
> secret celebration of ancient season feasts & moons.
> Rewrite the calendar.
> (Revolutionary Letter #58)

Again, as with "Revolutionary Letter #50," "joy" becomes transformed from an individual emotion to an ordering principle of collective experience, one that reaches its hand deep into history and returns with what has been lost, what has the ability to transform. Joy as an ordering principle, allows us to "rewrite the calendar," and return to practices indigenous to European cultures, or that of di Prima's own Italian background, that predate the Catholic Church and thus constitute the "remnants of pre-colonized pre-Roman Europe" that she references in the line prior. Di Prima's moon collages show this type of reclamation in action as she honors the phases of the lunar cycle them with images, poetry, and reflection. This blending of historical inquiry and active poetic practice, seen from *Revolutionary Letters* and the poetic "lab" space of her notebooks, is key to our ability to animate the knowledge that di Prima recovers for us, and with us.

This complex blend of history, intuition, and research grows over the course of *Revolutionary Letters* during the 1970s, as City Lights takes over its publishing starting in 1971. Yet this type of deep engagement with structures of knowledge—from dreams to Central Park protests—would not be possible without the groundwork of di Prima's publishing and printing in the 1960s as a

fundamental act of shaping poetic community and poetic knowledge through projects like Poets Press and *The Floating Bear*. The evidence of her work is material—printing presses operated, books printed, mimeos mailed—but also networked and social, as in the letters from Creeley and Berkson that attest to the immensity of her publishing work in the 1960s. Thus, *Revolutionary Letters*' first three years as an ephemeral performance piece with Peter Coyote, syndicated series in underground newspapers, and most traceably a mimeograph publication from Ann Arbor to London, mark what we might consider a pivot point for understanding the immensity of one of di Prima's facets. Namely, by understanding her skill as a printer, editor, and publisher in the service of politically-minded poetry, we can now turn to another facet of her work: her exploration and challenging of different knowledge traditions and structures in the bodies of her poems.

Chapter 3: Building Poetic Cosmology in *Revolutionary Letters*, City Lights 1971-1979[19]

In a 1970 letter to "Larry," or Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Diane di Prima shares a new project:

> Will call you—around July 1—about the Rev. Letters. Yes, I was just thinking it was about time to do them as a book. Maybe with some other poems – political or not as you like - - - the stuff that was in War Poems may be and newer political or semi-political poems –there are 40 R.L.'s + I'd just as soon do a fatter book than that. Haven't had any new poem-book since New Hand-book of Heaven, which happened in '63—[20]

By early 1971, City Lights had published its first edition of *Revolutionary Letters*, marking a physical shift in the poems from mimeographed versions to a "new poem-book." The poems had dynamic lives before this edition, and di Prima's feeling that "it was about time" suggests their willingness to settle into print, instead of running rampant as newspaper dispatches, performance pieces, or mimeographs from Ann Arbor to London.

By October 1971, City Lights printed a second edition with six more poems, noting this expansion in the copyright notice, and extending the work all the way to "Revolutionary Letter #49." Thus, the first three years of mimeograph and small press distributions of *Revolutionary Letters* established its role as a type of poetic broadside and template for radical living, in line with di Prima's other efforts to build poetic community in the midst of political turmoil. The four

[19] Or, "a poet that don't know shit ain't no poet," after Gregory Corso
[20] Box 3, Folder 21. "Di Prima, Diane 1956-1970, undated." City Lights Books Records, BANC MSS 72/107 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

subsequent editions of *Revolutionary Letters* by City Lights from 1971 to 1979 offer insight into its progression as a poetic body.

In March 1974, the third edition was published with letters stretching up to "Revolutionary Letter #63." The order of the poems is untouched except the final letter (#63), which was "Revolutionary Letter #49" in the third edition. By the fourth edition, the letters stretch to "Revolutionary Letter #70," and "Revolutionary Letter #63" returns to its place as "Revolutionary Letter #49." While the fourth edition from City Lights marks eleven years of generating new *Revolutionary Letters*, after 1979, the work continues to transform in various publications, mostly broadsides and translations. In 1981, "Revolutionary Letter #21" was published as a broadside, when the text was out of print. In 2007, Last Gasp of San Francisco, generally known as a comics press, printed the book in a fifth edition, expanding up to "Revolutionary Letter #91, for Gerrit Lansing" with additional poems. City Lights is currently preparing a new edition, due in 2019.

While the earlier forms of *Revolutionary Letters* suggest that its publishing practices were designed to move the poems into the world—dispatches to newspaper syndicates, mimeographs, and other low-cost high-volume practices—to some extent, the City Lights editions highlight the progression of the work as a poetic unit between book covers. For di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* this manifests as a form of accretion: with the exception of "Revolutionary Letter #43" and "Revolutionary Letter #63," di Prima does not alter the order of the letters, does not edit letters included in prior editions, and adheres to a strategy of adding "Revolutionary Letters" that are always placed before the six final poems. *Revolutionary Letters* builds momentum through constant revisitation, rather than revision: each letter expands the possibility of the project, instead of revises and distills meaning within individual poems. By exploring how these poems proliferated from 1968 to 1979, we see how di Prima's project evolves to shape the type of poetry and publishing practices that she believed her era required.

We might consider this strategy of accumulation as a hallmark of di Prima's work, and a testament to her constant engagement of poetic practice—*Loba*, as well, was published in multiple parts over the span of decades. However, since the publication history of *Revolutionary Letters* is marked by a strategy of accumulation rather than revision, the few alterations across editions deserve close attention. In particular, the most notable textual change is "Revolutionary Letter #49" in the second edition becoming "Revolutionary Letter #63" in the third edition, to stay in its place as final letter. The fact that this letter, with its iconic "free all political prisoners" mantra, was rearranged to serve as the capstone for both the second and third editions is significant. In part, this editorial choice may be a result of the letter's comprehensive, all-encompassing language, listing everything from "the otters in Tucson Desert Museum" to "prairie dogs poisoned in New Mexico," from "every black man a political prisoner" to "Free Timothy Leary / Free seven million starving in Pakistan" ("Revolutionary Letter #49/#63). The poem operates as a type of roll-call of political imprisonment, written in response to the jailing of the Living Theatre in Brazil on marijuana charges. The final lines demand solution:

> Free them
> Free yourself
> Help to free me
> Free us
> DANCE
> ("Revolutionary Letter #49/#63)

The final lines of *Revolutionary Letters* until 1979 are optimistic and forceful, reinforcing di Prima's poetic project of joy as a powerful mode of liberation. In contrast, the final poem of the fourth edition, "Revolutionary Letter #70" strikes a darker tone, in prose format that contrasts with the staccato rhythm of "#49." Its final lines underscore the contrast in tone between the second and third editions' endings, veering from freedom to delusion:

…in the dark all news
is old news, the only glimmer the lambent marshlight of our flesh as we gesture
towards difference, a burgeoning race of mutants,
gorging on drugs, come, California wine, richness
of fruit and meat on a planet spinning towards famine;

Perverse
and mushrooming cadence of phosphorescent loves, falling
to compost as the sun goes out.
We greet the dark.

("Revolutionary Letter #70, fourth edition)

The density of images is striking, as well as the apocalyptic, mystical quality of this prose in contrast to the percussiveness of "Revolutionary Letter #49/#63." The "lambent marshlight of our flesh" becomes the only source of light in the poem, fractured as it is by "gesture[s] towards difference" instead of the collective exhortation toward freedom that "Revolutionary Letter #49/#63" encourages. The "perverse / and mushrooming cadence of phosphorescent loves" suggests a hallucination, prefigured by "gorging on drugs," "California wine, richness /of fruit and meat on a planet spinning towards famine" that speaks directly to consciousness of ecological crisis in the 1970s. The mixture of ecological catastrophe, human ignorance, and darkness that makes "all news old news," creates a dire setting and conclusion, that seems to suggest difficulty and importance of ceding "all power to joy" as a regenerative force. These two contrasting endings do not require reconciliation, but rather show the strength and possibilities of di Prima's editorial process in which poems accrete and the *Revolutionary Letters* expand. Instead of tightening, restricting, and honing a singular takeaway or thesis for *Revolutionary Letters*, they grow in real time, building on the lived experience of the poet. The simultaneous presence of "DANCE" and "greet[ing] the dark" as concluding poems at different moments within this singular, accreted poetic body attest to the complexity of messages this work offers, at distinct moments in its publishing trajectory.

On Cosmology, Cosmogony

Attributing the way that *Revolutionary Letters* expands across editions to di Prima's "editorial style" is likely a misnomer, given the fact that di Prima does not edit the work, but allows it to expand as the poems dictate. This vision of a body expanding ever-outward is particularly salient given di Prima's interest in cosmology, the branch of science that studies the origins and development of the universe, which she explores in *Revolutionary Letters* and her work more broadly. In "Rant," a poem anthologized in *Pieces of a Song* (1990) and Brenda Knight's *Women of the Beat Generation*, di Prima exhorts: "You cannot write a single line w/out a cosmology / a cosmogony" (*Pieces of a Song* 159). This statement, an *ars poetica*, indicates that without a scientific understanding of the origins of the universe and its scale (cosmology) and also a scientific address of the nature of reality itself (cosmogony), a poet cannot forge her most basic unit of craft. For di Prima, forms of knowledge and understanding are not in the provenance of the academy or the theoretical, but inherent in an attentive life. She continues:

> 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
> ("Rant")

By first advocating for a cosmological and cosmogonic foundation for poetic practice—the *writing* of a single line, the act of doing so, the *praxis*—di Prima sets the stage for practical considerations. By the time the poem reaches the question of practical occupation—a necessary evil of poetic life—this combination has morphed into a full-fledged *poetics* and not just poetic language.[21]

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[21] I discuss di Prima's approach to "poetics" in the final chapter, especially through her work at New College.

Di Prima iterates the importance of cosmology that is not corroborated by technical definitions, but rather forged and experienced within the world. In *Recollections*, she recalls a pivotal moment in her developing consciousness, seeing a vision of the universe after eating peyote in New York City:

> The universe I saw that night, on my first "trip" was Newtonian—though I couldn't have called it that then: for me, at that moment, I was seeing absolute truth, seeing it like it is—a universe of absolute precision and mechanical law. A "metallic" universe I called it in my mind: I could hear the clicks and whirling sounds it made as it did its thing…But humans—humans…moved helpless, soft, through this calculated dance, were crushed by this cosmic machine so easily…We were so tender, I wept for us. (*Recollections* 211)

Di Prima later notes that one of the "magickal visions" achieved by an adept in Aleister Crowley's system is the "Vision of the Universe as a Machine," situating her own intuitive experience within a larger history and framework of cosmological knowledge. In this reflection, di Prima places a highly scientific vision—Newtonian, no less—of the "clockwork universe" as something that can be experienced with profound emotional depth. In "Revolutionary Letter #50," di Prima reminds us, "No need to fear "science" / groveling apology for things as they are," and reiterates this in her vision: to see the universe is an act of profound sensitivity, for our vulnerability and its immensity.

The interrelatedness of poetics, cosmology, and cosmogony in di Prima's work is politically significant, especially in light of the historical eras her work spans. Cosmology and cosmogony are disciplines now found in astronomy and physics departments, not in poetry workshops. The separation of humanities and scientific knowledge in Cold War America was institutionally and

culturally sanctioned; C.P. Snow's Rede Lecture in 1959, "The Two Cultures," noted the intellectual split between the sciences and the humanities, and the detrimental nature of this division. Likewise, Muriel Rukeyser notes this in her piece, "Darwin and the Writers," drawing attention to how Darwin "loved this meeting-place" of poetry and science, and how his work became influential to the writers who came after him even though "the sciences" had become separate from questions of poetry (2). By the early twentieth-century, the growing cultural perceptions of science as distinct from other bodies of knowledge was reinforced by increased non-specialist knowledge of scientific conversation, facilitated by the prevalence of general science journals (like *Science, Scientific Monthly, Physics Today, Scientific American*, and others) and other mass media events, like fireside chats with scientists, as part of a culture that filtered large-scale industrial and government-funded scientific research into a mass-market understanding, often by contrasting science against other practices like poetry or art (Middleton 52).

During this period, poets—despite their "humanities" affiliation—engaged multiple forms of scientific knowledge in their work, ranging from Muriel Rukeyser's biography of Willard Gibbs, an important physicist in the nineteenth century, to references to cybernetics in Charles Olson's *Kingfishers*, even Robert Duncan's list of nuclear physicists like Vannevar Bush in "The Fire: Passage 13" (Middleton 184). Some artists even pursued prestigious science-based careers before turning fully to the arts; Jess Collins left his career as a chemist working for the Manhattan Project and the Hanford Atomic Energy Project in 1949 after an apocalyptic vision. While Peter Middleton argues that Rukeyser and Olson are the two poets in midcentury America who are "most aware of the implications of working with scientific knowledge" during their era, to this we might add Diane di Prima (122). In another world, or perhaps if she had been born a decade earlier, di Prima may well have been a physicist. In an interview with David Meltzer on her early education, di Prima notes that she

> was in the top two percentile in math and physics. There was a lot of propaganda that the U.S. needed scientists. So their little claws were out there: come and be a scientist. I majored in physics at Swarthmore. However, they weren't equipped. They were teaching nineteenth-century physics; nobody was teaching relativity. So it was very boring and didn't work, and I dropped out of school… (*San Francisco Beat* 2)

For di Prima, the pressure to "be a scientist," grounded in extensive government-funded grants and military expansion, culminates in intellectual disappointment. She claims that the physics program at Swarthmore had not yet advanced to the twentieth century to include truly modern physics, incorporating discoveries in relativity, nuclear fission, and quantum theory. Di Prima continued her education informally after dropping out of Swarthmore, taking "integral calculus at Brooklyn and theory of equations at Columbia," as well as coursework at Hunter College and the New School for Social Research, as she learned Greek and Italian, visited museums, and continued her education as a poet (*San Francisco Beat* 6, *Recollections* 109). During her first years living in Manhattan, she worked at the Electronic Research Lab at Columbia, remembering how she "smoked my first pot with the scientists there, as we sat for hours watching electrons in an oscilloscope" (*Recollections* 114).

The "little claws" of "be a scientist" represent a specific historical phenomenon that shaped not just the perception of the sciences in America, but the organization of vast (and hitherto interdisciplinary) knowledge structures into disciplinary containers within academic departments. In the introduction to *The Cold War & The University: Towards an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years*, David Montgomery writes, "the Cold War reshaped university structures and the content of academic disciplines, just as it penetrated the whole fabric of political and intellectual life," including the increased large-scale government funding of scientific research (xii). This represents a historical departure; like literary or artistic work, scientific study was sponsored by philanthropy (such as the wealthy patron model or university donor), local industries, or university funding until 1919, when

the Massachusetts Institute of Technology rearranged their departmental structure to allow corporations to sponsor academic research (Kaiser; Jahnke). The stock market crash of 1929 tempered the success of MIT's strategy, but in 1940, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the National Defense Research Committee, which became the Office of Scientific Research and Development, in order to sponsor scientific research on the eve of World War Two. By 1950, President Harry Truman established the National Science Foundation, whose budget increased from 40 million in 1957 to 500 million in 1968 due to Cold War concerns (Jahnke). Between technologies of warfare, such as the atomic bomb and Agent Orange, and technologies of communication, from computers to the internet, the twentieth century vivified the interwovenness of scientific inquiry and technological innovation on an ecological, cultural, and personal scale unlike anything prior in our historical register.

This context gives di Prima's incorporation of ideas such as cosmology and cosmogony a specific political charge, especially in "Revolutionary Letter #62," appearing by the mid-seventies in the third edition. She asks us to:

> check Science: whose interest does it serve?
> whose need to perpetrate
> mechanical dead (exploitable) universe
> instead of living cosmos?
> ("Revolutionary Letter #62," 1974)

By capitalizing the word "Science," di Prima alerts us to the historical specificity of this moment—a Cold War form of science, paid for by the government and large industries, designed to increase national capacity for commercial development and warfare. In asking "whose interest does it serve," di Prima underscores this sponsorship, advocating for understanding the universe as a system of interdependent, networked energies, a "living cosmos." By challenging ideas of the mechanical, the dead, and the exploitable, she challenges the hierarchies of the planets themselves, gesturing towards

astrology as an early scientific practice that correlated patterns on planet Earth with wider celestial frameworks:

> whose dream those hierarchies: planets & stars
> blindly obeying fixed laws, as they desire
> us, too, to stay in place
> whose interest to postulate
> man's recent blind "descent" from "unthinking" animals
> our pitiable geocentric isolation:
> lone voice in the stars
> ("Revolutionary Letter #62")

In the poem, "Science" constitutes a system of anthropocentric hierarchies and predictable behaviors that works on a cosmological scale. From the movement of the planets to the movement of people, all isolated and isolate-able as a result of a teleological narrative of progress and advancement, this belief correlates the question of scientific advancement—or the discovery of principles that govern the universe—to a concept of evolution that casts humans as the most refined and advanced species which di Prima identifies as a "descent," separated from other species by arrogance and their own systems of "pitiable geocentric isolation." Di Prima offers the endgame of this conception of Science by stating: "what point in this cosmology but to drain / hope of contact or change / oppressing us w/ "reason"" ("Revolutionary Letter #62), arguing that when unquestioned, paradigms of Science when figured not as "living cosmos" only serve to shore up systems of hierarchy and control.

Given the massive engine of government-funded, corporate sponsored science and technology research in the 1950s and 1960s, di Prima's address of science as a conceptual figure in *Revolutionary Letters* raises a question shared by Charles Olson and Muriel Rukeyser in particular: what might be gained from *poets* studying science when large-scale government-funded grants worked and still work at the cutting edge of scientific innovation in the service of warfare, military, and territorial expansion to the very moon? Part of this debate boils down to which populations can claim the

"right" to applying scientific knowledge. Middleton argues that midcentury poets displayed "physics envy" "as they selectively imitated the discourse, metaphors, and images of nuclear physics," arguing that if there "were doubts about the use of physics, they were likely to be doubts about just who had the right of inquiry, who could be called genuinely scientific" (Middleton 9, 10). Indeed, it may be beside the point that poets are rarely *bona fide* lab scientists, as Middleton notes, and more generative to consider the possibilities of de-centering the postwar paradigm of physics as the ultimate explanation of the universe (Middleton 11; Middleton 39). Rather, we might take humanistic inquiry as an essential contribution to contextualize the sciences.

This question has evolved in the field of digital humanities scholarship today, with big data, distant reading, and large-scale technical analysis of literary corpora with HathiTrust, Google Books, and digitization projects in libraries and special collections. One of the primary arguments for intermixing quantitative and humanities methods is that if humanists do not at least engage with digital and computational tools, that these large sectors of corporate and government-driven innovation (which stem from the grant programs and investment in science, technology, engineering, and math fields that began around di Prima's era) will produce all of our tools, craft our conception of large literary data, and limit the type of knowledge that is visible in digital and even analog spaces. It stands that a scholar of poetry will find something different to admire in computer code than a statistician, which creates far more possibility in the field than if the poets leave code to the scientists.

How Poets Make History

Di Prima anticipates this type of conversation half a century prior in asking whose interests "Science" serves: if we do not understand the historical implications of this question, we stand to lose part of our cultural heritage that is embedded in the history of scientific practices. More

sinisterly: we will forgo our ability to use these forms of knowledge to the benefit of both our poetry and our lived experience. Among her Beat brethren, Gregory Corso models a similar perspective, evidenced in recordings of his 1981 summer lectures at Naropa. Over the span of the summer, Corso taught a class that essentially covered the history of the universe, beginning his first lecture with the zodiac cycle and the evolution of humans. He describes Lucy, a bone fossil skeleton discovered in 1974 that dates back over three million years, to his students, incredulous that they had not heard of the discovery:

> You don't even...none of you ever even heard of [Lucy]? You see, but being poets, I'm telling you, something! A poet that don't know shit ain't no poet...I mean it! A poet that doesn't know what the fuck is going down in the human story don't have it. Or they can feel sitting under a tree, and "Oh, how nice that bluebird is!" But that's about it! Then you like the poem but you don't dig the poet. See, "I wanna talk to that poet who wrote that nice poem about the bluebird under the tree!" But you know about Lucy? No? What the fuck! Forget it! (*Lectures at Naropa* 31).

Corso, a first-generation Italian American who spent most of his childhood homeless, was incarcerated as an adult at 17 and learned to write poetry at that time. Described by Anne Waldman as "our bad boy, poet maudit, our youngest 'beat,' altar boy, mad professor, catalyst," known as "a Herald" to Jack Kerouac and "pure velvet" to Allen Ginsberg, Corso was well-known in and beyond the Beat establishment, having met authors from William Carlos Williams to "Jimmy Baldwin" to Jean Genet. (*Lectures at Naropa* 1). Corso's life was not marked by commercial success, and much of his work remained unpublished in later years as he sold his notebooks to survive. For Corso, "a poet

who don't know shit ain't no poet," and the subjectivity of the bluebird-in-the-tree poem is both cheap and fleeting in the context of the vast subjectivities of human history.

This type of poetics flies in the face of her academic and anthologized contemporaries in the 1960s, who Rasula describes as "patiently laboring under a vast cultural misconception, imagin[ing] that authenticity is conflatable with subjectivity, not realizing that subjectivity is simply the most acutely engineered of all our technologies—voice-activated, setting in motion a replay of cultural "memories" which are generic and thus belong to nobody" (Rasula 49-50). The subjectivity in *Revolutionary Letters* is not reflective but dynamic—"make a point of filling your bathtub / at the first news of trouble"—and far from taking subjectivity as mistaken authenticity, di Prima's poetics testify to lived experience in her historical moment and refuse to be encapsulated in a hermeneutic shell of language, divorced from the world. In many ways, Charles Olson's poetics, as established in "Projective Verse," lay the groundwork for this. He begins: "Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings," locating poetry squarely in the body and lived experience, far away from abstraction (*Collected Prose* 239). For poets like Corso and di Prima, who cut their teeth in Manhattan during the Beat scene with performances, publications, and deep conversation, poetics do not consist of a finely-tuned inner subjectivity but rather the alchemical reaction of the poet conveying history and embodied experience—with all its scientific dimensions—to the present world.

This type of practice returns to the very question of cosmology, particularly as Charles Olson defines it as the first topic of his three-part *Beloit Lectures* (published as *Charles Olson: Poetry and Truth: The Beloit Lectures and Poems*, with a transcription by George Butterick and editing by Donald Allen (Four Seasons Foundation, for The Writing Series, San Francisco 1971). He describes cosmology as a

> spiritual condition I think many people in this room have already known in other ways, which is to get around on the other side of the nature of anything, especially, like, what we now can call our experience and not mean something that's subjective, but is common. I happen, as a poet, to be interested in what is the old word, I think, for creation as a structure—which is the word cosmology. I got to it in a series of visions or dreams… (13-14)

For Olson, cosmology—or "creation as a structure"—is a vehicle for understanding our common experiences, rather than the internalized subjectivity that isolates poetic voice into categories of identity or genre for academic consumption. Cosmological knowledge can be obtained through "visions or dreams," both intuitive means, as opposed to studied in books (though Olson likes those too). Through his lectures at Beloit, Olson explores this "old word," and indeed its slipperiness—but notes its essential nature as an antidote to poetry as a series of institutionally-sanctioned capsules of subjectivity. Rather, cosmological knowing is a tool for imagining history and also creating it through poetry—as Edward Sanders' *Investigative Poetry* pronounces: "that poetry / should again assume responsibility / for the description of history" (6).

Returning to Professor Corso: importantly, his students were already the product of a postwar and Cold War world that divided science from poetry. After Corso discusses Lucy, a student timidly asks, "What periodical, or what...where did you find it?" and Corso responds "*Any!* Any. *Scientific American*, if you want! Anthropology things" (*Lectures at Naropa* 31). While Corso's response suggests a wide availability of this type of knowledge, it also attests to the specificity of how it is prescribed—as scientific, or anthropological, rather than poetic. This type of exchange reflects on *Revolutionary Letters* as well, for its rich interplay of scientific and political knowledge alongside poetic subjects, and especially in light of the question of which knowledge systems or

disciplines are made visible, part of the common language of experience, which systems are denied, buried, or parceled out as specialist knowledge. Against the backdrop of news media, war propaganda, and increasing citizen surveillance, the very question of what poets were allowed to know and what they were denied was critical in this political era. In "Revolutionary Letter #22," di Prima asks,

> what do you want
> your kids to learn, do you care
> if they know …
> ...history, socalled, which is
> merely history of mind of western man, least interesting
> of numberless manifestations on this planet?
> ("Revolutionary Letter #22")

History, here, is a cordoned-off and vanilla version of the Western male mind, rather than a dynamic, global force for understanding the past's relationship to the present. This subject, for di Prima, is a bore of "numberless manifestations," which we might take to mean either qualitative knowledge, or perhaps more readily, of the innumerable variants of history that exist across countries and cultures. The theme of a dangerously restricted conception of history echoes throughout *Revolutionary Letters*, with particular consequences about how we see time itself:

> As soon as we submit
> to a system based on causality, linear time
> we submit, again, to the old values, plunge again
> into slavery. Be strong.
> ("Revolutionary Letter #50")

This type of language, it seems, offers the most vivid counterargument to any reading of *Revolutionary Letters* that focuses on the "domestic" at the expensive of the scientific and cosmological; here, di Prima is arguing for nothing less than total restructuring of time and space—through physics and also historical understanding. The systems of "causality, linear time" and "old values" reference patriarchal, colonial domination of planets and bodies that *Revolutionary Letters* on the whole resists.

Di Prima's approach to time offers not just a different way to experience history, but a path for revisiting cycles of knowledge that get written out in the progressive march forward that the twentieth century embraced as "science and progress"—that is, atomic warfare, industrial pollution, and other "benefits" of increased spending on scientific research by the military and private industry.

In Toni Cade Bambara's "Working at It in Five Parts," the fifth section, "And I've been Pregnant Ever Since" aligns with Corso and di Prima's work on how poets accumulate knowledge, given the artificial separation of what constitutes poetry and what constitutes science, despite the historical intertwining of these fields in human culture. Bambara writes of this paradox:

> …thousands have been jamming at the juncture of the organic and inorganic worlds for years; molecular biologists, to name one obvious group. And there are many who sense no contradiction whatever bridging the material/objective scientific perspective and the spiritual/"subjective" metaphysical perspective—there are, after all, Marxist mystics and truly dialectical physicists (note how the quantum folks borrow heavily from mystics and poets to get their work done). The once impenetrable borders that separated the medical arts from the mystic arts resemble these days a swinging door. What kind of language will hasten the removal of all those artificially erected barriers so that we may become available to all the forces afoot in the universe?…What is the sound and operations of the language that will reflect this new technology of living? (48-49)

While Bambara articulates these ideas in the service of a new language, "designed in the Afro-centric mode," this template broadly considers poetry and language the "swinging doors" between medical and mystical practice, scientific and metaphysical inquiry. Through these practices, these doors might be fully removed from their hinges—or, after Charles Olson, become "the hinges of civilization to

be put back on the door" as he writes in *Kulchur* number five, spring 1962 (*Collected Prose* 416). Doors, in fact, proliferate as a metaphor for the type of *access* that these new imaginings afford. In *Polis is This*, Henry Ferrini's film on Olson and Gloucester, Amiri Baraka flags "the whole question of putting the hinge back on the door," or "trying to find out what had been hidden from us by the emergency of this new one-sided society" in twentieth-century America (Alcalay 126). Baraka pushes further, noting "it is like the door opened and the door closed" for understanding poetry as a "teaching instrument," to contain both a "wide sweep of information" and "be emotionally raised up" (Alcalay 80). Di Prima's work is essential in thinking through the questions raised by this door—off its hinges, swinging freely, opening and closing—because it highlights the stakes of how knowledge determines which thresholds we can or can't cross, due to failures of politics or imagination. In doing so, her work thoroughly interrogates the boundaries of poetry as a subject, and instead takes its method of inquiry into larger systems beyond the subjective self that dominated academic verse in twentieth-century American culture.

For di Prima, this method always requires a deep historical understanding of its subject, especially to recontextualize the work of the present. In "Revolutionary Letters #33," one of the original poems in the first City Lights editions, she asks:

> how far back
> are we willing to go? that seems to be
> the question, the more we give up
> the more we will be blessed, the more
> we give up, the further back we go, can we
> make it under the sky again, in moving tribes
> that settle, build, move on and build again
> owning only what we carry, do we need
> the village, division of labor, a friendly potlatch
> a couple of times a year, or must it be
> merely a 'cybernetic civilization'
> which may or may not save the water, but will not
> show us our root, or our original face, return
> us to the source, how far
> (forward is back) are we willing to go
> after all?

(“Revolutionary Letter #33)

Di Prima correlates a deep dive into historical knowledge as a possibility to become “blessed” in a climate of uncertainty, in the midst of ecological crisis (“save the water”) and the growing necessity of reclaiming practices that place people closer to the land and each other. Implicit in the word “tribes” and in the scenarios of living that she describes in the poem are indigenous American practices of nomadic life, and the specter of genocide that fundamentally haunts American settlement and its paradoxical “civilization.” This fundamental truth of American life contrasts with “cybernetic civilization,” a term coined by Norbert Wiener in 1948 that describes a culture built on cybernetics itself, a field of inquiry for understanding systems of information and control for a new technological age. Cybernetics, a concept that fascinated Muriel Rukeyser and Charles Olson, promised a new way of conceptualizing systems and life in an era of rapid scientific progress. Muriel Rukeyser, known for her biography of neglected but highly influential scientist Willard Gibbs, was particularly intrigued by the possibilities of applying cybernetic methods to poetic criticism (Jaussen 25). While Rukeyser attempts to frame poetry in light of this new and pervasive postwar analytic, di Prima is not so sanguine: “merely ‘cybernetic civilization’” is floated as a possibility in the poem because it “may or may not save the water,” but even the term “cybernetic civilization” is couched in quotes, setting it off as a concept, buzzword, rather than an integrated part of the language of the poem or the poet. Di Prima goes on to use the idea of cybernetic civilization as a volta for willingness to examine other ways of life and go deeper within our own histories, claiming that cybernetic society cannot expose “our root, or our original face” and as a result we must be willing to examine how far back we are “willing to go after all” in terms of seeking knowledge to restore this root, this sense of original self. Any system that fetishizes the future without explicating the past runs counter to *Revolutionary Letters*’ insistence that we “return...to the source”—or discover occulted or erased practices, and interpret them within a radical political framework.

Over the course of the first eleven years of its textual transmission, Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* demonstrates not just the radical possibilities of poets claiming knowledge beyond the narrowing disciplinary boundaries of post-World War Two culture, but also the significance of revolutionary publishing—without institutional support, within a far-flung geographic community, as one of few women operating a letterpress and running a mimeograph magazine. Once City Lights began publishing *Revolutionary Letters* from 1971 to 1979 in its second major compositional period, its publishing history reveals a cosmological approach: it is an accumulation rather than revision, a constantly growing array of ideas that expands outward from and into the world itself. As letters that encourage us "we have the right to make / the universe we dream," these poems spark community, historical inquiry, and political awareness ("Revolutionary Letter #50). Through these dimensions, *Revolutionary Letters* not only acts as poetic amber for the moment of history it encapsulates, but also shows its true form as a work of practical and cosmological magic.

Chapter 4: Diane di Prima's Alchemical Revolution

Di Prima began studying the iatrochemist Paracelsus intensely around 1965, after Felix Morrow contacted her to write the introduction to a reprinted two-volume set of A. E. Waite's nineteenth-century translations of Paracelsus (*Recollections* 422). Di Prima remembers a "princely sum" of two hundred dollars for the introduction, and how she had hitherto "heard vaguely of Paracelsus" until she read both volumes "straight through." This experience proved transformative for her, starting a lifelong study of alchemy that persists today; once she "did the Paracelsus there was no stopping reading alchemy after that. It was all the time" (Hadbawnik). In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, she reflects on this conversion-like discovery:

> I didn't guess that Paracelsus would change forever my way of seeing the world. When I actually began to read him, there was that part of me that recognized even what was most obscure in those pages as inevitable and *true*...There is some infallible mechanism in us, something like a dowsing rod of the heart, and it moves in us sometimes—moves seldom, but with total authority.
>
> I wasn't at all sure then what alchemy "meant"—if indeed it meant anything that I could ever express—but I *recognized* it, and I knew from then on it would be a part of my life. (*Recollections* 423)

Paracelsus, who lived from 1493 to 1541, contributed significantly to alchemical knowledge by applying its chemical principles to medical healing (iatrochemistry). In doing so, he foregrounded the importance of spiritual purification alongside chemical knowledge of the meticulous steps of the *magnum opus*, or Great Work of transmuting base metals into gold. Paracelsus, ultimately, practiced alchemy for healing: a way of linking knowledge of the body to spirit and matter. For di Prima,

whose *Revolutionary Letters* opens with the clarion call, "I have just realized the stakes are myself," the complexity of spiritual and physical revolution that she was articulating in her work may well have found transhistorical companionship with Paracelsus' own doctrines.

The study of alchemy itself is highly complex, given that its connotations range from quack science to spiritual purification. Most literally, alchemy is understood as a historical practice that serves as the basis of modern scientific inquiry in the Western European tradition. William Newman and Lawrence Principe, in "Alchemy vs. Chemistry: The Etymological Origins of a Historiographic Mistake" (1998) advocate for the use of the term "chymistry" to refer to both alchemical and chemical knowledge in the early modern period, as a means of semantically acknowledging that our contemporary conceptions of chemistry and alchemy were essentially entwined until the late seventeenth century. Likewise, Newman and Principe suggest the term "chrysopoetics" to refer specifically to conceptions of alchemy that involve the *magnum opus*. By using "chrysopoetics," they argue, we might circumvent the range of occult-oriented connotations that accompany alchemy as a concept, including strains of Gnosticism, Rosicrucianism, Christian mysticism, and other esoteric practice.

The term "chrysopoetics" seeks to reauthorize alchemy's respectability as a historical practice, even though alchemy's reputation and legitimacy has always been in historical flux. Our most vivid evidence of this occurs in literature; as Stanton J. Linden argues in *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (1996), reiterated by Theodore Ziolkowski's *The Alchemist in Literature, From Dante to the Present* (2015), depictions of alchemy in literature fluctuate according to alchemy's mainstream relevance, shifting through cycles of skepticism and spirituality. For instance, when alchemical knowledge is considered on the vanguard of scientific inquiry, as in the early modern period, contemporaneous authors such as Ben Jonson (*The Alchemist*) treat it with suspicion. When alchemical knowledge loses its perceived scientific rigor, it appears instead in poetic

works as a mystical and spiritual practice (as with the metaphysical poets, including John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*).

And after its dethroning from scientific status during the Enlightenment, alchemy proliferated in the works of Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, William Butler Yeats, and then in postwar American poetry from Gregory Corso to Jack Spicer, Diane di Prima to Helen Adam. In particular, the first half of the twentieth century saw a profusion in studies regarding occultism and mysticism, of which alchemical knowledge might be considered a subset, against a wider backdrop of Spiritualism and religious revival in the nineteenth century. From William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (1911), Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* (1917), and up through Carl Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), the first half of the twentieth century produced extensive thought on mystical, alchemical and occult traditions—likely in no small part due to the psychological impact of the two world wars.[22]

In particular, modernism had an obsession with occult knowledge forms and practices, which Timothy Materer's *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* details to great effect. Key moments in this history include Yeats' *A Vision*, composed through dictation from his wife Georgie; H. D.'s hermetic and ancient Greek visions in *Trilogy*; T. S. Eliot's modernist epic, *The Wasteland*, germinated from his close encounter with the grail myth as depicted in Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1922); and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. These surface-level examples each point to a deeper poetic practice—the use of "the occult" as both a storehouse of symbolic and metaphorical knowledge that had been obscured or withheld from society, and also as a provocation for a method of dictation, poetic reception, or poetic meaning-making in an era where global, industrialized, and militarized life caused prior concepts of the self to fragment. Poets after 1945 continue this type of engagement,

[22] This profusion of texts, however, started slightly earlier—Mary Anne Atwood published *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery* in 1850 in England.

with practitioners including Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Charles Olson, Gerrit Lansing, and Diane di Prima herself.

The study of alchemy by poets adds new nuance to its historical valence. Written in 1965, di Prima's "Paracelsus: An Appreciation" notes that alchemy is not "merely a forerunner" to modern-day chemistry, but "a complete and highly developed discipline, a western equivalent of the great spiritual disciplines of the East" (26). For a scholar like Diane di Prima, the complexity of alchemy as a historical, scientific, and spiritual practice is likely part of its allure; for many scholars, "alchemy's multivalence, in fact, is precisely the point" when read across visual, textual, and historical traditions (Nummedal 335). In this capacity, Diane di Prima's approach to alchemy can be more fully revealed by considering how her understanding of the subject relates to the political, cultural, and ecological era of her poetry. Perhaps most powerfully in *Revolutionary Letters*, di Prima's "Revolutionary Letter #53," subtitled "How to Become a Walking Alchemical Experiment," makes vivid this necessity of context. In this short letter, di Prima demonstrates alchemical knowledge of the *magnum opus* alongside a tangible, embodied sense of the environmental and political anxieties in the 1960s and 1970s. This poem is deceptively simple: it has received almost no critical attention, perhaps because it is read as a witty nod to di Prima's awareness of the alchemical tradition and nothing more. And indeed, di Prima has written and lectured on alchemy at far greater length, including an article on John Dee, lectures in her Hidden Religions course at New College, courses offered through the San Francisco Institute of Magical and Healing Arts (SIMHA), her introduction to Waite's *Paracelsus*, and her poetry itself.[23]

But brevity is, of course, an art that can reveal both depth and breadth. The poem itself is a quick punch, organized around the invocation of each of the three alchemical elements—mercury,

[23] A brochure for SIMHA for "Classes, Workshops, and Intensives" in Fall 1985 mentions "The Language of Alchemy" will be a new course offering for the spring. (Berg Coll Di Prima ZC6 S26 1985, given by Ann Charters).

sulfur, and salt—and their potential manifestations in environmental pollution and modern warfare. As a whole, it reads:

> eat mercury (in wheat & fish)
> breathe sulphur fumes (everywhere)
> take plenty of (macrobiotic) salt
> & cook the mixture in the heat
> of an atomic explosion
> ("Revolutionary Letter #53")

In "Revolutionary Letter #53," di Prima iterates the fundamental chemical elements and procedures of the Great Work, or *magnum opus*—a series of chemical and spiritual rituals designed to turn base metals into gold. Traditionally, mercury, sulphur, and salt constitute the three (al)chemical ingredients that constitute the basis of the *magnum opus*, or the Great Work of alchemy, which are manipulated according to a series of chemical interventions and successive stages of heat.[24] To produce the sequential phases of the *magnum opus*, the alchemist uses a crucible to heat, distill, and purify these elements; although significantly in the tradition of alchemy, the chemical equation alone is not enough to produce the *magnum opus*. In alchemy, these elements and procedures are timeless entities, almost symbolic features—yet in di Prima's poem, each element corresponds to a particular historical and ecological context in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States: wheat and fish for mercury, omnipresent sulphur fumes, macrobiotic salt, and atomic explosion.

In 1940, geographer Carl Sauer blends archival and ecological concerns in his writing on "old truth," stating that "traditions die with the old people; documents are destroyed; weather, storm, and flood erase the physical remnants; science and market standardization destroy old crops" (Alcalay 144). By the 1960s and 1970s, poetry communities demonstrated increased awareness of the

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[24] While alchemists must decipher, reconcile, and execute the steps laid out in ancient and cryptic texts, such as the Emerald Table, it generally proceeds along the lines of four specific stages: *nigredo*, blackening, decay, and putrefaction, *albedo*, whitening and purification, *citrinitas*, yellowing and increasing purification, and *rubedo,* reddening and final purification that develops into the substance of the *magnum opus*.

intertwined worlds of destroyed documents and crops, resulting in activist poetry from poets like Diane di Prima, Gary Snyder, and Michael McClure. Margaret Ronda reads this type of poetry as "symbolic refusal of concepts of property, accumulation, and expropriation for an era of generalized environmental crisis," against a backdrop in the 1970s of increased protests against industrial pollution (""NOT PEOPLE'S PARK / PEOPLE'S PLANET": 1970s Revolutionary Pastoral"). Many poets in counterculture traditions were cultivating environmental awareness through experiments in communal living, exploration of new diets (such as macrobiotics), and participation in organizations such as the Diggers. Consolidating these growing energies, Lawrence Ferlinghetti contemplated a "Radical Ecology" edited volume in the late 1960s at City Lights, and the file of his research remains within the City Lights Records. The collection of broadsides, mimeos, zines, and clippings address growing consciousness of ecology, posthumanism, and other environmental concerns around the 1960s, as well as speak to the proliferation of this subject in activist communities around the Bay Area at the time, through grassroots organizations like Ecology Action Educational Institute (Berkeley, CA), the Growth Centers of North America (who advocated for World Ecology Year 1972 during a July 1969 meeting), and on the East Coast, an Anarchos zine, "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought," which argues for an anarchistic approach that directly addresses ecology.

In particular, the "Earth Read-Out" mimeo broadsides (published at ERO, 439 Boynton, Berkeley, California 94707) contains updates on the state of pollution, counterculture, and chemical industries on bright yellow paper. One issue, dated November 1969, begins:

> A year ago hardly anybody in the U.S. knew what ecology meant. Today almost everybody has at least a sense of it—and most overground media are now providing

> the kinds of information ERO did when it began last spring. The psychic changes have occurred with surprising rapidity.[25]

This issue goes on to note that while increasing ecological consciousness may produce political change, deeper structures of imperialism, war, lack of intersectional politics, and a human-centric universe remain on hand to destabilize any greater good that might ultimately occur.

In this ecological context, di Prima's invocation of alchemy's building blocks—in a manner that evokes the large-scale industrial pollution that had become commonplace by the 1970s—is striking. These very elements, the *prima materia* of the *magnum opus*, inform di Prima's own understanding of the world through her study of Paracelsus. She writes:

> Examine the tables of elements—how many are there now? Ninety-six? One hundred and eight? Well, for Paracelsus, there were four elements: fire, water, earth, and air; and the three substances: mercury, sulphur, and salt. What have we gained by the change? Aside from the inconveniences of nuclear fission, poisoned food, and flouridated water, we are supporting the dead weight of a huge number of inane technicians, engaged day and night in inventing new entities to bolster their crumbling systems: fermions, bions, ergons…The alchemists of Paracelsus' day saw unity (a single substance, or principle under many disguises) where we spend years cataloging differences: they felt the world as organic. ("Paracelsus: An Appreciation" 26)

[25] Carton 1, Folder 28. "Ecology Manifestos 1969-1972, undated." City Lights Books Records, BANC MSS 72/107 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Di Prima's appreciation of Paracelsus is inextricable with her understanding of "Science" as she describes it in *Revolutionary Letters*—an antithesis in its current industrial practice to "living cosmos." Fragmenting the world into atoms as part of the scientific consciousness of the post-nuclear only results in "inane technicians" with their "fermions, bions, ergons" that lead to "poisoned food" and nuclear fallout—both themes in "Revolutionary Letter #53." For di Prima, alchemy offers a model for understanding that is based in unity, cohesion, and organic experience. And ultimately, this type of scientific approach is not only more historically continuous with prior eras, but also offers restorative possibilities to the fracturing of knowledge by disciplinary fields (arts and sciences) on the level of matter itself. As Ammiel Alcalay notes in *a little history*, the fact that our historical record has been "atomized" speaks specifically to this type of scientific postwar consciousness, in which fragmentation becomes a given that obscures the possibilities of imagining otherwise. Against this atomization, in her very poetics, di Prima has "insisted on living with her work as record, document, and palimpsest, without rushing to codify it" (Alcalay 209). Importantly, she practices what she observes through this alchemical unity in poetry, archive, and library.

By situating the alchemical valence of each element in di Prima's *magnum opus* alongside the social, historical, and ecological dimensions of that particular element in midcentury America, we might more fully see how di Prima invokes alchemy in "Revolutionary Letter #53" as a means of making sense of our era of ecological crisis. Through this historical anchoring, the poem suggests how alchemy might be reclaimed as a transformative practice in the twentieth century. By understanding "Revolutionary Letter #53" alongside other threads of alchemical knowledge in *Revolutionary Letters*, we might use di Prima's formulation of alchemy as a lodestone of erased and occulted knowledge in the postwar era: an opportunity to study and reinvigorate these lost forms of knowledge with fresh ideas and urgency.

Mercury

eat mercury (in wheat & fish)

Before addressing the specific context of Diane di Prima's invocation of mercury, we benefit from historical context of this particular element—especially since our understanding of it has changed drastically since its discovery. Despite its known toxicity today, the earliest known uses of mercury were primarily medicinal. Before the twentieth century, it was used to treat syphilis, digestive disorders, and address a variety of reproductive concerns—alternately used as an abortifacient or fertility treatment, as well as to sanitize the womb after childbirth (Swiderski 7, 28, 34). In early autopsies, black powder was often found in the digestive tracts of patients who had been instructed to take raw mercury medicinally, as a result of chemical interaction between elements in the body and the mercury. These autopsies evoked chemical reactions that had hitherto been observed in the alchemical lab; Richard Swiderski's *Quicksilver: A History of the Use, Lore and Effects of Mercury* (2008) notes that this powder is "akin to the black "faeces" of mercury that alchemists regarded as an impurity to be removed on the way to creating "philosophical mercury" (23). Thus, di Prima's initial instruction to "eat mercury" gestures to this initial iatrochemical use, as well as its potentially alchemical (although deadly) consequences in the human organism.

The role of mercury in amalgamation became increasingly important in the nineteenth century, once this practice was implemented on the industrial scale. Using mercury to extract other heavy metals made mining mercury itself highly lucrative—at times more so than gold—as with the case of the mercury mining industry in Northern California in the late nineteenth century.[26] From

[26]Andrew Scott Johnston argues that "the Golden State" should rightly be renamed "the Quicksilver State" due to its rich stores of mercury and its global contributions to quicksilver mining (19). Johnston notes that California was the "largest producer of [mercury] in the Western Hemisphere" in that it contained the New Almaden mine, considered the richest mine of any type in the state (1, 2). Mercury, in many cases, is essential for the extraction of gold and silver from mines, and this

this mining history, focused on industrial extraction of the metal, comes the large-scale industrial use of mercury in the chemical industry. At the time, there was not universal agreement that this type of widespread use posed a risk; Fred Aftalion's history of the modern chemical industry laments that "regulatory burdens have multiplied, especially environmental ones, causing higher costs to industry and yielding either no benefits or negative consequences" (404). Aftalion is incorrect; lack of regulation in the early twentieth-century was integral to widespread mercury contamination of local ecologies.

The high rate of mercury contamination is due to an innate property of the element, which readily shifts from heavy metal to vapor, and forms a dense, slippery liquid at room temperature. When mercury particles are released into the air as a byproduct of primarily coal plants, the element enters bodies of water or groundwater through the hydrological cycle. Mercury then encounters bacteria, which chemically alters it to methylmercury, a powerful neurotoxin that is most notable for how it tenaciously accumulates in the tissues of animals (including humans), increasing in concentration as it moves up the food chain. This accumulation quickly causes neurological effects, including tingling sensations or loss of sensation in limbs, inability to speak, difficulty or inability to speak or hear, and even clonic seizures; in the womb, it may cause cerebral palsy, neurodevelopmental delays, and cognitive deficits (Bernhoft). Beyond its devastating and painful effects on individual humans, mercury poisoning represents a containment challenge. Once it is in

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quality means that whoever controls the mercury supply controls the supply of bullion and other precious metals (3). In light of this geopolitical importance, Johnston argues that the geological richness of mercury in California is responsible for the level of independence of the developing American West (3). Indeed, most of the mines are concentrated in the northern regions of California and in the Coast Range Mountains, including veins not too far from di Prima's own life-transforming and life-affirming San Francisco. Mercury, rather than an abstract alchemical element, constitutes the very soil upon which di Prima, the Diggers, and other counterculture collectives stood in the 1960s and 1970s.

the environment, it is difficult to prevent mercury from moving through the hydrologic cycle, the food chain, and human bodies themselves.

As its medicinal and industrial histories illustrate, mercury "persistently approaches human bodies along the curve of a cycle powered by human activities," from ingestion in raw form for medicinal purposes to more recent ecological crises in which mercury contaminates groundwater, fish, and grain supplies (Swiderski 9). Once meted out in internally-administered doses or released in the alchemical lab, industrial uses of mercury in the chemical industry have released the heavy metal into the environment on an unprecedented scale—now, it is if the whole world was the crucible, and mercury can readily pervade nearly all of the bodies and entities it contains. Di Prima, rather than abstracting mercury into the alchemical realm, contextualizes it in light of contemporaneous humanitarian and ecological crises—and indeed, her own experience.

"Poisoned wheat" was at the forefront of countercultural consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s; it is the very title of a poem by Michael McClure, published by di Prima's Poets Press in *War Poems*, which also featured work by Charles Olson and Diane di Prima, and also in *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts* Number 5 Volume 8, and printed by Oyez Press in 1965. Olson, who in a 1966 letter to Walter Lowenfels, praises the poem as "the only distinguished poem" on the war in Vietnam (116). With its repetition of "There is death in Viet Nam," and proclamation that "our bodies are mad with the forgotten memory that we are creatures," the poem was printed in six hundred chapbooks by Robert Hawley at Oyez Press for McClure to distribute directly to those with sway on foreign policy in Southeast Asia (Hemmer 263). Given the poem's close address of the Vietnam War, the correlation between poisoned wheat and poisoned political intervention was close at hand, encapsulating the tone of the era.

Speaking to poisoned wheat as a specific, literal substance: despite the level of toxicity in agricultural products in the 1960s, di Prima notes their wide acceptance, matched only by active

antagonism towards organic produce. Her own interest in the subject was spurred by a friend, Billy Linich, who nursed her back to health with macrobiotic food after she found she could no longer digest her usual fare (after years of living on coffee and speed); he "came over and took care of [her], cooking strange concoctions [she] could actually digest" (*Recollections* 418). But purchasing macrobiotic food, let alone learning about it, was fraught. She remembers:

> In the months before I left New York there were police raids and wholesale rampages where FDA agents tore open bags of organic grain, poured them on the floor, and then sprayed them with pesticide. If a store contained both books about the foods (what they could heal) and the foods themselves—that was definitely considered illegal. The owner was threatened with arrest for "practicing medicine without a license." (*Recollections* 419)

Di Prima's short opening line in "Revolutionary Letter #53," then: "eat mercury (in wheat & fish)" serves as the tip of the proverbial iceberg of an enormous ecological crisis, at once signaling the start of the *magnum opus* and heralding a new global era of poisoning in government-regulated food supplies.

Beyond di Prima's own experiences, numerous high-profile cases of industrial-scale mercury poisoning were receiving government and media attention during the general era of "Revolutionary Letter #53," and awareness of these incidents dovetailed with scientific and medical discoveries. While as late as 1938, women still followed Margaret Sanger's advice from a 1914 pamphlet to douche with bichloride tablets containing mercury to prevent pregnancy, only a few decades later, in 1962, the first congenital effects of mercury poisoning from industrial sources contaminating the environment were identified (Swiderski 33; 37). Key sites of research for these congenital effects

were traced back to an accumulation of methylmercury in the fish that surrounded industrial plants, most infamously in Minamata City, Japan. In May 1956, local doctors grew concerned over increasing cases of central nervous system pathology in their communities, and by November 1956, a team of medical investigators had determined that Minamata Bay had a high level of mercury contamination due to the Chisso Corporation's factory runoff. The methylmercury was bioaccumulating in fish and shellfish, and then the humans and other animals who consumed them. As of 2001, the mortality rate of those who were identified as experiencing mercury poisoning from the industrial pollution hovered at fifty percent: of the total of 2,252 human victims that have been identified, 1,043 have died (Harada).

Minamata disease, a neurological syndrome caused by severe mercury poisoning, is named after this area and incident, and constituted a watershed moment for health crises resulting from environmental pollution. Around the time that it occurred, and still today, Minamata Disease received a great deal of publicity globally, adding to concerns about the growing chemical industry, and environmental degradation.[27] However, mercury poisoning on such a wide scale through water sources was not an isolated event in Japan, although events at Minamata offered a scientific template to determine mercury poisoning in other places. Dr. Masumi Harada, who studied Minamata disease, determined that "members of a community of native Ojibwa people who lived on the shores of a river in Ontario, a river polluted by a papermill, were also victims of Minamata disease" (Swiderski 37). Filtering into public consciousness, mercury's connotation shifted: once purposely manipulated

[27] A 1971 documentary by Noriaki Tsuchimoto titled *Minamata: The Victims and Their World* was released in Japan as the first of many documentaries on the ecological and humanitarian crisis, and on an official level, the Japanese government's Ministry of Environment supports the Minamata Disease Archives as part of the National Institute for Minamata Disease, established in 1978, ensuring that the legacy of the event will remain even when environmental balance is restored ("National Institute for Minamata Disease").

and internalized within the human body—particularly female—it now invaded, often unannounced, in high quantities that threatened the brain and basic functions (Swiderski 38).

One of the primary drivers of the chemical industry's expansion in post-World War Two global markets was an increase in the agricultural industry, and heightened demand for fertilizers and "crop protection products" as in the kinds that may have violated di Prima's grains from organic food stores (Aftalion 241). Mercury was a key player in the agricultural industry, used as an antifungal to treat the seeds themselves, starting in 1913 commercial distributions of grain seed and continuing with the 1929 trademarking of Granosan, a "seed disinfectant" made of ethylmercury and toluene (Swiderski 70-71). The deadly effects of mercury in this treatment were a known secret among those who worked in the laboratories, and in a 1964 study, P. Lesley Bidstrup cited forty-five cases of organic mercury toxicity occurring in "laborers and laboratory technicians in the factor making the seed dressings, packers, inspectors and sellers of the preparation, and farm laborers who applied the dressings before planting" (Swiderski 71). Nevertheless, almost a decade after this research and at the same time as di Prima's first publication of *Revolutionary Letters* by City Lights, Iraq experienced a large-scale catastrophe involving mercury-treated seed that was unwittingly used for bread production during famine.

After a series of devastating harvests, the Iraqi government imported grain from Mexico, which had been treated with methylmercury as a fungicide. The ongoing food shortage, combined with unclear labeling (in another language) and potentially also lack of communication between rural areas and officials, meant that this grain was often ground up into bread and consumed. The imported, mercury-treated grain was distributed to farmers across Iraq from September to December, and the first case of poisoning was admitted to the hospital on December 26, 1971. With 73,000 metric tons of mercury-treated wheat distributed throughout Iraq's rural areas, scientists hypothesized that almost all individuals who consumed contaminated wheat experienced some level

of poisoning (Al-Tikriti, K. and A. W. Al-Mufti 16). Hospital numbers, which show 6,530 people admitted for symptoms, likely do not include those who were treated for minor poisoning at outpatient clinics, or those in extremely rural areas who died without medical treatment (Al-Tikriti, K. and A. W. Al-Mufti 17).[28]

While Al-Tikriti and Al-Mufti describe the educational and government outreach efforts to prevent further spread of the poison grain throughout the ecosystem—including in animals who may have consumed the grain as feed and would have thus bioaccumulated mercury in their tissues (19)—others have indicated that poor communication between city government officials and rural populations contributed to the further spread of mercury in the environment of rural Iraq. Upon determining that the grain was the cause and that it was being consumed, the government ordered that all farmers relinquish their supply upon penalty of death. Poor communication lead to farmers dumping grain to avoid persecution, which made its way even further into the ecosystem, including in birds that communities ate as a last resort in the famine.

Like Minamata disease, poisoning from mercury-contaminated grain occurred globally from the midcentury onward. It was deemed responsible for earlier crises regarding bread made with contaminated mercury-treated grain in Iraq in 1956 and 1960, and also in Ghana, Guatemala, and Pakistan (Al-Tikriti and A. W. Mufti 15). The effect of these widespread, mass poisonings was the subject of a United States Senate Subcommittee in 1970, precipitated by the Huckleby case stateside in which a family, including a pregnant wife, ate poisoned bacon from their pig who had been fed

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[28] A short announcement in the *British Medical Journal* from March 25th, 1972, from Salem F. Damluji and Sadoon Tikriti from the Department of Medicine in the Medical College of Baghdad University in Iraq, was the bellwether of the humanitarian crisis at hand: "We would like to draw attention to an outbreak of poisoning from the mercurial compound Cranosan M (ethyl mecury p-toluene suphonanilide), which has ravaged Iraq in the last two months. The poisoning occurred among farmers whose wheat grain had been dressed with the fungicide. The number of hospital-admitted cases exceeded 5,000, and the deaths reached 280. A similar outbreak on a smaller scale occurred in this country in 1961 and has been reported." (Damluji and Tikriti 804)

with scrapings from an agricultural seed depot in Texas (Swiderski 76; 74). Ever alchemical—but suddenly political and ecological—mercury from the chemical industry melded with human bodies to create devastating consequences, eventually ushering in increased environmental regulation. Yet ever mercurial, the heavy metal persists in the ecosystem long after the original incidents.

Thus, the implications of di Prima's "eat mercury" in both wheat and fish demonstrates the scale and reach of mercury in multiple forms—not just the result of a single industrial incident but a pervasive and invasive phenomenon that is characterized by large chemical companies operating at the expense of thousands of human lives. This invocation politicizes di Prima's alchemical poem, arguing for an understanding of mercury, even alchemical, that is not part of an esoteric, occulted, aesthetic tradition of the past but that is firmly rooted in the lived experience of the era of *Revolutionary Letters.*

Furthermore, mercury's close historical association with the reproductive body—whether used in abortions, fertility treatments, or later considered an invasive toxin that poisoned infants and mothers from the inside out—dovetails with di Prima's own gendered position in *Revolutionary Letters*. In "Revolutionary Letter #42," which opens with the question of the "overpopulation problem," di Prima states "chemical fertilizers / have to go, nitrates / poison the water; large scale machine farming / has to go," and in the next stanza goes on to note that "40% of the women of Puerto Rico / already sterilized, transistor radios / the 'sterilization bonus' in India," correlating the question of agricultural industry with fertility and the stymying of non-white female bodies ("Revolutionary Letter #42"). Mercury, for both its environmental and reproductive connotations, is the political fuse that lights di Prima's alchemical oeuvre.

Sulphur

breathe sulphur fumes (everywhere)

The biblical term for sulphur is brimstone, which is fitting given the way its presence appears in twentieth-century America. As another original *prima materia* in the alchemical *magnum opus*, operates rhetorically in di Prima's "Revolutionary Letter #53" in a manner similar to that of mercury, calling out an aspect of industrial pollution and its effect on the body. In a limited edition 1969 broadside titled, "To James B. Rector," Michael McClure incorporates biological and atomic knowledge of sulphur in a rallying cry for the "NUEVO ALCHEMISTS" who are "one with the WORMS and BACTERIA."[29] The broadside, printed on white paper with blue and red font, memorializes James B. Rector, a student who was shot by police from a helicopter during protests. McClure begins with a quotation on the specific qualities of the sulphur atom, noting the limitations of examining its chemical properties in isolation, and continues by articulating Willard Gibbs' rule of phase: "FOR EVERY LEVEL OF ORGANIZATION, / MATTER DISPLAYS DIFFERENT PROPERTIES." He continues: "AND HELICOPTERS AND TOXINS / *ARE LESS ORGANIZED* / than the flesh of the earth!" In McClure's poem, Gibbs' rule is used not just to uphold the laws of physics, but the political power of an ecological understanding of bodies and self, in an act of protest poetry against a student killed by police violence.

Another contextual dive into the significance of sulphur in midcentury America reveals a similar narrative of industrial contamination of water and air. Sulphur, like mercury, is a naturally-occurring element whose presence in the atmosphere and in water has increased dramatically in the form of sulphur dioxide, a byproduct of burning coal or oil for energy within the manufacturing and coal industries.[30] While sulphur dioxide is released into the environment through volcanic eruptions

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[29] From Berg Collection, Berg Uncatalogued Manuscripts. McClure, Michael, and James B. Rector. *To James B. Rector*. San Francisco: 1969.

[30] Sulphur dioxide is also used for the preservation of food products, the creation of paper, and other industrial manufacturing—such as its innocuous presence on labels of dried fruit as a preservative.

and other natural geological events, it is toxic to humans with high levels of exposure and can instantly impede lung function if inhaled in high enough concentration (Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry).

While air regulations have helped reduce the amount of sulphur dioxide in the air in the twenty-first century, this effect has not been uniform. In places and historical eras during which coal was primarily used for fuel or where industries were unregulated, sulphur dioxide as an air pollutant remains or was especially prevalent. During the 1950s and 1960s, decades of unregulated industry led to high-profile smog cases, especially in places like New York City and London with high concentrations of both population and industry. Smog, which is an informal term for an intermingling of smoke, particulate matter, and air pollutants like sulphur dioxide, occurs when pollutants become trapped by a phenomenon known as temperature inversion and accumulate in low-hanging clouds over cities and towns with heavy industry. The side effects range from trouble breathing to death.

Since sulphur dioxide is often a part of smoke, smog, or other airborne pollutants, but it is odorless and colorless. Thus, determining its role in environmental crises can only be assessed after the fact by examining parts per million or billion in air quality measurements, and cross-referencing this data with seasonal averages as well as daily death rates in cities. This type of investigative work is responsible for identifying a series of smog-filled days in New York City 1953 as having a statistical correlation between increased sulphur dioxide levels and a higher-than-usual death rate in the city, effectively calculating the death rate at 200, nine years after the incident, and with almost nonexistent reporting on the health effects of the smog cloud that dominated the city that year (Popkin). In 1966, a similar event prompted a similar number of deaths, smog from the city caused increased complaints of eye and lung irritation, with individuals noticing restless animals at the zoo and decreased visitors to the Empire State Building (Dwyer). During the 1950s and 1960s, these types of

incidents pervaded in industrialized and highly populated spaces, and increasingly began to take on the tone of a public health crisis.[31]

Di Prima, a native of New York City and a resident until her official move to San Francisco in 1968, would certainly have been familiar with the smog and pollution of the city during the 1950s: "show me / a city which does not consume the air and water / around it for miles" ("Revolutionary Letter #32"). Her pronouncement to "inhale sulphur fumes (everywhere)" in "Revolutionary Letter #53" captures the totalizing effect of these smogs, but also gestures to another feature of sulphuric pollution. Like mercury, sulphur's presence in air and water leads to chemical complications, since it is difficult if not impossible to isolate chemical pollutants once they enter the hydrological cycle.[32] Sulphur, like mercury, becomes a deadly, often silent contaminant once activated courtesy of the chemical industry, and becomes impossible to separate out from common resources and arguably human rights, like water and air.

Understanding the larger energies of mercury and sulphur in di Prima's contemporaneous moment gives us a more thorough understanding of the thematic role chemicals play in *Revolutionary Letters* on the whole. In di Prima's poetics, the presence of chemistry does not necessarily equate to

[31] In 1962, the BBC reported a pervasive fog around London that was spreading across other spaces in the country, noting that the levels of sulphur dioxide were the highest on record in Leeds, and that cases of pneumonia in Glasgow had tripled. The article cites a higher-than-usual death rate and advising individuals to stay inside or make their own face masks for protection (BBC News). As a result, the United Kingdom passed two Clear Air acts in 1956 and 1968, including mandates for higher chimneys so sulphur dioxide byproduct would escape higher into the atmosphere and be less likely to make contact with human lungs.
[32] Increased quantities of sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxide make normal rainwater acidic, resulting in a phenomenon called "acid rain" that occurred frequently in the 1950s, near Midwestern coal plants in the United States. While the term itself "acid rain" conjures thoughts of acid sizzling through an umbrella, the dangerous effects of acid rain are initially invisible. The effect on humans is largely ecological, through the supply sources for food and water: acid rain turns bodies of water acidic and therefore inhospitable to certain flora and fauna. Acid rain also alters the delicate balance of pH that maintains stable soil, drinkable water conditions for animals, and even algae levels in lakes. The effect of unsettling the ecological base of the food chain quickly becomes catastrophic on an ecological level, hence the danger of acid rain (Dybas).

the presence of alchemy—but that from 1968 to 1979, during the work's main compositional period, we might use "Revolutionary Letter #53" as a cue for understanding the evolution of chemical to alchemical knowledge in di Prima's poetics. In "Revolutionary Letter #16," one of the poems published in the first mimeograph editions from 1968 onward, di Prima addresses the chemical industrial root of these forms of pollution:

> every large factory is an infringement
> of our god-given right to light and air
> to clean and flowing rivers stocked with fish
> to the very possibility of life
> for our children's children
> ("Revolutionary Letter #16")

Echoing the reproductive themes of mercury, the large-scale industrial theft of natural resources like air and water through pollution and contamination, as well as the mercury-laced fish of Minamata Bay, this poem performs similar work as "Revolutionary Letter #53." The time difference between these two poems is notable: the latter does not appear until the third edition of *Revolutionary Letters*, published in March 1974 by City Lights. Why, then, does di Prima choose to go alchemical with "#53" when she states similar ideas in "#16?" The publishing evolution of di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* marks increasing interest in highlighting occulted forms of knowledge, with poems that tackle cosmological and scientific questions. In this context, di Prima's alchemical poem marks a significant poetic project within *Revolutionary Letters*—reaching for the occult to contextualize and reframe her current political moment.

Salt and Ritual

take plenty of (macrobiotic) salt

Unlike the first two elements, mercury and sulphur, salt entered the alchemical canon later on, in the sixteenth century, courtesy of Paracelsus. Paracelsus translated alchemical knowledge into the practice of iatrochemistry which gives salt a healing connotation, particularly in the context of di

Prima's poem. Salt is both part of the alchemical tradition and dietary considerations that emerged from the counterculture movement, which became increasingly interested in the politics of food consumption.[33] As hunger strikes emerged as a tool of activism, so did free food programs with communities like the Diggers and the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast program—the former referenced in *Revolutionary Letters*: "drove across / San Joaquin Valley / with Kirby Doyle / grooving / getting free Digger meat / for Free City Convention" ("Revolutionary Letter #11).[34] Other dietary choices such as vegetarianism, macrobiotics, and even purchasing through food cooperatives emphasized activism and ecological components. Particularly through macrobiotics, which blended sensibilities of Eastern tradition and Western scientific authority, food could become healing.

In Richard Grossinger's edited volume, *The Alchemical Tradition in the Late Twentieth Century*, Diane di Prima's essay, "Paracelsus: An Appreciation" lives within the same covers as an essay by Jacques de Langre, who had met George Ohsawa, the author of *Zen Macrobiotics* (1959) in the 1960s and later founded a company to sell unrefined Celtic sea salt. His essay in Grossinger's volume extols the curative and medical virtues of sea salt in its natural state, advocating for its use. More advertisement for Langre's product that critical essay, it nevertheless illustrates how the presence of salt in the alchemical tradition became incorporated in health-related and nutritional knowledge during its twentieth-century incarnations.

Returning to the language of "Revolutionary Letter, #53," "macrobiotic salt" refers to a style of Celtic sea salt harvested for its nutritional density; de Langre's salt would certainly fit this bill, given his relationship with George Ohsawa and their mutual appreciation of unprocessed product. However, in the alchemical tradition, it is important to note that the *prima materia* (mercury, sulphur,

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[33] See Warren J. Belasco's *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*. Cornell University Press, 2007.

[34] The groundbreaking work of the Black Panther Party in providing free meals was targeted by the United States government and FBI counterintelligence, even as the government adopted this strategy with the USDA's pilot program to serve free school lunches.

and salt) are not necessarily those elements that we would associated with what we now know as the periodic table. For instance, mercury is a category of element, practically an alchemical archetype, rather than a scientific determination. In the same way that the category "bread" does not determine a precise chemical makeup of the food we might consume under that name, we might consider the presence of macrobiotic salt in this poem as both a gesture and reference to ongoing discussions about alchemical or occult knowledge and its relationship to healing. For "Revolutionary Letter #53," alchemical elements act as inhabitable spaces, bringing flexibility to the alchemical equation, and inviting the reader to examine the new embodiments of mercury, sulphur, and salt in their current moment—as possibilities for harm or healing in an era of environmental crisis.

Salt also signals on a deep level to ritualized religious experience, given its use as a purifying element in practices from Catholicism to ancient Greek worship. This ritualistic connotation prepares the groundwork for the ritualizing act of the poem—the application of heat to the crucible, cementing the presence of alchemical elements to their ritual use, which is constantly refined, recontextualized, and re-envisioned through historical eras and religious practices. Di Prima's intensive knowledge of premodern ritual, within and beyond the Western tradition, makes her an expert on some of these types of ritualistic uses, which I will explore in our discussion of her occult library.

Atomic Heat and Crucible

& cook the mixture in the heat
of an atomic explosion

The atomic explosion that di Prima refers to here is most transparently the atomic bomb, dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States to end the second World War. Despite the concreteness of this reference, the atomic bomb was not only an incident in and of itself in the 1940s, but a represented a certain consciousness of ecological and human destruction that framed

the era to follow. In fact, the mayor of Minamata has said that his city should become a "sacred" one, "a monument to the horror of pollution as Hiroshima is to the atomic bomb" (Pollack). The large-scale industrial poisoning of mercury and sulphur is not separate from atomic consciousness, but a part of it. Swiderski notes that workers on the Manhattan Project did not fully know the consequences of radiation on human systems in the 1940s—like mercury, some radiation was thought to have beneficial effects (43). It might be said that the rate of innovation in scientific study, as well as increased government and industry funding for research and development, created little incentive to understand the risks of technological development in advance of wringing out their rewards.

Michael Rumaker, writing of his experience at Black Mountain College in the 1950s working with the poet Charles Olson, describes how class discussions turned towards the question of radioactive fallout:

> ...the upper atmosphere in those times was so radioactive with the atomist dust of "clean" bombs and "dirty" bombs—Olson paused significantly to ask us what we made of that language—their poisonous clouds penetrating the sky, then raining down their radioactive rain, an analogous radiating all around of the fallout of attitudes and toxins even infiltrating the air of our long green valley... (333)

Di Prima considers the rhetorical aspect of atomic energy in a manner similar to Olson, placing it alongside her alchemical elements that signify the widespread chemical contamination of the environment. It is difficult to overstate the effect that the atomic bomb had on the generation that saw it detonated. In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman,* di Prima reflects on her father's entrance to her eleventh birthday party, carrying a newspaper with the news of Hiroshima:

> The room grew silent. The cake sat on the table, candles unlit...my father threw the paper, still folded, on a coffee table. He said, *Well, we lost,* and all hell broke loose. The bitterness in his voice. Everyone spoke at once: how could we lose? What had happened? Was the war over?...It was the Bomb, although none of us knew what that was. It was Hiroshima, although none of us knew where that was. He said, *Whatever we do now, we've lost.* (50)

This vivid memory, complete with the hysteria of a forced birthday party, shows the psyche-shaping effects of the atomic bomb in the context of di Prima's life. The opacity of her father's statement, and its unwillingness to provide details or context, marks a new era for di Prima: a birthday becomes a death anniversary. "Revolutionary Letter #53" animates the intensity of atomic awareness with its punctuation. While parenthetical asides contain the ecological and political context of mercury, sulphur, and salt, the atomic explosion and all its clout in its very own line. The explosion ends the poem like the falling of a missile, with only silence and blank page after.

Overall, we might say the style of this *magnum opus* is apocalyptic—which is to not to undermine the alchemical procedure, but to place it in fresh historical context for di Prima's generation. However, di Prima does not obliquely state one key element in "Revolutionary Letter #53" for the *magnum opus*. While she specifies the heat source for the elements (atomic explosion), she does not specify their crucible, or container for heating. Yet she does leave clues in the syntax: "eat," "breathe," and "take" are all active verbs performed by a primary subject—generally a living creature. Each of these verbs connote internalization, consumption, even digestion of the alchemical elements internally. From this, di Prima frames the crucible of alchemy as a human body. "Eat," "breathe," and "take" are all imperatives that can be done by a singular individual. The imperative verb "cook" in this context is perverse in its reflexivity—like the *ouroboros*, or snake eating its own

tail that constitutes a symbol of alchemy and of di Prima's own Poets Press imprint, "cook" implies an immolation that the crucible must perform on itself to complete the rite.

In di Prima's poetics, the body is not just the site of modern alchemy, but the revolution itself. "Revolutionary Letter #1," the first of the letters, begins, "I have just realized that the stakes are myself...this flesh all I have to offer" ("Revolutionary Letter #1). Charles Olson articulates this sentiment in "The Resistance: for Jean Riboud," which states "it is his body that is his answer…the absolute of his organism in its simplest terms" to the question of what happens "when made is reduced to so much fat for soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings and shoes for sale" (*Collected Prose* 174). Riboud, a friend of Olson's, French resistance fighter, and mathematician, had been interned at a camp and dwindled to eighty pounds; the body, "reduced to so much fat for soap," is deeply implicated in this political dimension of life after the Holocaust. For di Prima, "Revolutionary Letter #53" contextualizes this figuration alchemically, placing the body in ecological (mercury in fish) and political (heat of the atomic explosion) context as both vessel and a force. The final direction to "cook the mixture in the heat / of an atomic explosion" makes good on the self-consuming aspects of the *prima materia* that di Prima defines ecologically—mercury, sulphur, salt, all literally bioaccumulating in tissues and bodily systems.

In "Revolutionary Letter #53," di Prima ultimately links the alchemical body (as a primarily internal and psychological feature) to an external, politicized world. We cannot fully make sense of the poem without accounting for the historical context of this practice—to overlook it would be to simplify the poem to a brief ode or homage to alchemical knowledge, when it is capable of signifying far more in the context of *Revolutionary Letters* on the whole. This relationship between internal and external cannot be overstated for its resonance in early twentieth century thought. One of the primary revolutions of consciousness in the era of Sigmund Freud was the shift in the belief that reality was external to our bodies—rather, the key to understanding reality as we knew it was located

deep inside us psychologically, even in moments before we felt our own consciousness.[35] Likewise for Carl Jung, alchemical symbolism was a potent means of using external knowledge to better understand the unconscious or subconscious self. Di Prima, working in this vein, weaves the external, material aspects of the *prima materia* with their ecological and political context, using the catastrophic consequences as a means of reflection. In this work, she performs an additional stitch that early psychology neglected: by bringing in political and ecological context, she connects the inner back to the outer, to the landscape and environment and ecological conditions of lived experience. This move is one that sets di Prima's alchemy up for its innovation—the creation of community around alchemical ideas.

Women's Alchemy: An Activist/Community Practice

While the picture di Prima paints in "Revolutionary Letter #53" is necessarily grim, it establishes the important work of linking alchemical knowledge to historical, embodied context. As I argue earlier, while chemical knowledge appears throughout the version of *Revolutionary Letters*, over the course of the revisions alchemy begins to take center stage as a means of making sense of—and possibly transforming—the intermingling of chemicals, human bodies, ecologies, and communities. The third edition of *Revolutionary Letters*, containing poems from "Revolutionary Letter #44" to "Revolutionary Letter #63," builds extensively on alchemical thought from forty-four to sixty-three, strongly reinforcing the twofold practical work of alchemy that requires both spiritual readiness and knowledge of tradition to execute. For di Prima, there is no suggestion of alchemy without acknowledging its manifestations in the body itself, providing a model of science and technology

[35] See *Psychology and Alchemy*, Volume 12 of the *Collected Works*. Princeton University Press, originally published 1944.

that embraces humans as embodied, communal creatures. From the first new poem in the third edition, "Revolutionary Letter #44 (for my sisters)":

> ...women's alchemy, quick arms
> to pull down walls, we liberate
> out of our knowledge, labor, sucking babes, we
> liberate, and nourish, as the earth
> ("Revolutionary Letter #44 (for my sisters)")

"Women's alchemy," for di Prima, is an act of physical, intellectual, and ecological liberation, in which women destroy barriers, offer freedom through the power of knowledge, and nurture as mothers who mirror the macrocosm of the figure of the earth mother's ecological harmony and bounty. Here, alchemy is not used in the sense of the *magnum opus*, working specifically with elements and chemicals. Rather, alchemy represents the figurative work of transformation, or perhaps more aptly, transmutation, that combines elements for spiritual progress with obtaining forbidden knowledge.

By claiming a "women's alchemy" in her *Revolutionary Letters* (for her sisters), di Prima importantly reclaims the feminine elements of the history of alchemy and places them in communal perspective. In this act, di Prima is on the vanguard of other prominent figures in the history of alchemy. Writing in 1956, in *The Forge and the Crucible*, Mircea Eliade delineates the prehistory of metallurgy as a precursor to alchemy, and argues that cultures developed rituals and methods to process metals by heat, refinement, and cooling based on the observation that this process was already happening within the earth itself. Eliade argues that this parallel forms the basis of "as above, so below" in alchemy, which refers to the congruity in which alchemy's methods mirror the natural or the spiritual world. Scaffolding this argument onto prehistorical religion, Eliade argues specifically that the figure of the Earth Mother, or the planet as a feminine force, gestated and birthed metals as a type of sacred feminine process, and it is this allegorized, natural phenomenon that accounts for the development of proto-alchemy and its spiritual dimensions. When di Prima defines "women's

alchemy" as an act that "liberate[s], and nourish[es], as the earth," she adds credence to the paradigm of Eliade's prehistorical metallurgy as a proto-alchemy, devoted to and based on the principles of the feminine Earth Mother. For di Prima and Eliade, alchemy occurs when the energies of the feminine and knowledge of the earth are combined.

It cannot be overstated how counter to popular depictions of alchemical knowledge di Prima's "women's alchemy" appears—and indeed, this is part of its power. Alchemical knowledge is notoriously esoteric and difficult to pin down, in part because it contains strains from numerous other traditions—Rosicrucianism, Gnosticism, worship of Thoth, Christian mysticism, the legend of the Holy Grail. As a result, many of the texts that are considered essential to alchemy are of dubious or vexed origins, and a bibliographic history of alchemy leads to numerous dead ends, false starts, and fictionalized works. Perhaps due to the difficulty of tracing alchemical knowledge, figures that crystallize cultural conceptions of alchemy are often primary vehicles for studying the subject. From these histories, alchemy appears as a largely solitary and male practice, in direct antagonism to communal knowledge and embodied experience. The "masculine heroic image of chemistry as an evolving lab practice," as Johann Joachim Becher alludes to in *Physica subterranea* (1669) privileges the solitary male in scientific inquiry, renouncing the material world even as he attempts to perfect it chemically and spiritually.

Literature has long captured the solitary masculine stereotype of the alchemist, with tongue intermittently in cheek: Robert Browning's *Paracelsus* contains long passages bemoaning this solitary work and its distancing effect from the physical world, while Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* depicts Dr. Frankenstein—certainly an alchemist—as a tortured, intellectual male figure who abandons the world in search of esoteric knowledge and cannot face the consequences. This stock character reaches far back to Chaucer's era, in the *Canon Yeoman's Tale* and also Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, foregrounding the conception of the alchemist as deranged, separate from society, duplicitous, and

certainly male. However, these depictions of solitary, self-absorbed male alchemists run counter to Paracelsus' decree that spiritual perfection is one of the most important aspects of a successful *magnum opus*. Indeed, it may be because they are so emotionally and spiritually bereft that the male alchemists of literature fail so spectacularly in their Great Work.

The history of alchemy's depiction in literature is worth examining at such length because it contextualizes di Prima's radical conception of alchemy in *Revolutionary Letters* as a feminine, communal practice. This is in keeping with the forces and energies she highlights in her revolutionary tactics—dreaming, joy, and love in opposition to scientific and corporate hierarchy. In this sense, di Prima refashions alchemy for the twentieth century, placing it within revolutionary practice as a potent tool for understanding the history, and thus present, of science that was obscured and occulted by the varied energies of military, government, and corporate practices around World War Two.

With di Prima's action-based "women's alchemy," the presence of alchemy and its relationship to specific iterations of science and technology in mid-century America, is not just a conceptual question but one whose consequences graft readily onto lived experience. Roland Barthes wrote *Mythologies* in 1957 as a type of taxonomy of the everyday, told in vignettes related to specific media, concepts, and experiences. In this work, he describes plastic as an "essentially alchemical substance" because its physical properties reinforce "the very idea of its infinite transformation" (193). In contrast to the history of the *magnum opus*, which seeks to transform natural elements into rare gold, Barthes states that plastic "is the first magical material that consents to be prosaic" and whose "artifice aims for the common, not for the rare" (195). Barthes continues and finally concludes that because of plastic's magical qualities and tendency towards the prosaic, that "the hierarchy of substances is forthwith abolished...the whole world, even life itself, *can* be

plasticized since, we are told, plastic aortas are beginning to be manufactured" (195).[36] Like di Prima's alchemy, Barthes' alchemy is not a rarified practice but rather the daily substance of contemporary life, and both the ultimate stakes for Barthes' alchemy and di Prima's boil down to the body. With Barthes, the association of plastic and the human heart ultimately produce an alchemical body, fashioned from the alchemical products of twentieth-century science and technology. While di Prima's alchemical body is full of airborne and ingested pollutants and zapped by atomic energy, it nevertheless exists in the same hybrid paradigm.

Returning to the chemical knowledge that pervades *Revolutionary Letters*' earlier iterations, in "Revolutionary Note #6," di Prima references a similar rhetoric as Barthes' utopian plastic by exhorting her readers to "avoid the folk /...who see the blood but not the energy form / ...they love us and have a colorless tasteless powder / which is the perfect synthetic food" ("Revolutionary Note #6"). For di Prima, it is not enough to see the physical aspects or needs of people—to recognize blood or the need for sustenance—but one must also acknowledge the deeper forms inherent in blood and food—the energy and essence of the body that cannot be strictly anatomically labeled or scientifically distilled. For Barthes, the plastic possibilities of embodied experience prefigure Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto,* which reinscribes hybrid bodies, feminized knowledge, and technological innovation for a new digital era. Alternately, for di Prima, instead of capitulating to the possibilities of engaging with structures built from capitalist, postwar science, her poetry in *Revolutionary Letters* depicts what happens when we embrace another paradigm—not based on the scant possibilities we've been offered but on the expansive, capacious birthright she argues that we have as creatures in a living cosmos.

[36] Plastic manufacturing was made possible by Willard Gibb's research on the rule of phase, and Muriel Rukeyser wrote Gibbs' biography—another layer of connection to poets writing in this era.

In *Revolutionary Letters*, di Prima's alchemical knowledge is deployed for activist purposes, and exists alongside a larger reconsideration of the relationship between technology and machinery to the natural world—or how using technologies in harmony with nature and community can become a revolutionary act. In "Revolutionary Letter #49," another poem from the third edition's rather alchemical core, describes "machinery" as "extended hands of man / doing man's work," placing the realm of technology firmly in the human, part of an anthropocentric planet. Yet she immediately links this human element to the natural world and to the ecological corollaries of washing machines and electric lighting:

> Diverted rivers
> washing my clothes, diverted fire
> dancing in wires, making light;
> and heat. To see it thus is to see it, even
> diverted rivers must resume their course, and fire
> consume, whatever name you call it.
> ("Revolutionary Letter #49)

Di Prima breaks down contemporary technologies to their initial technological root—one step removed from the natural world. For the washing machine, while industrial-era technologies ultimately created an in-home, electricity-powered device for this task, the washing machine rests on the initial premise of humans determining how to divert rivers, make aqueducts, or otherwise channel the movement of natural water flowers. The choice of a washing machine in this instance lends a sensuality to the poem, a sense of bodily immediacy at the effect of the technology.

In a similar but not identical vein, di Prima cites "diverted fire" as the basis of the filament lightbulb, a technology produced by the invention of electricity. Technically speaking, electricity is not "diverted fire" in the same literal way that washing machines require "diverted rivers;" electric filament lightbulbs give off heat and light due to electrical current and flow, not because they are a contained fire in and of themselves. But given electricity's capacity to start devastating fires, and given the lightbulb's invention to replace open flames, the connection remains visceral and

significant. The result of this slightly imperfect mapping serves to link technologies and their roots not just on the initial technological development that makes others possible mechanically, but on the initial technology that makes future technologies possible conceptually.

More evocative than diverted rivers for laundry, fire is mythologized in the Prometheus legend in Western culture and as a primary technology for alchemical purification. Both fire and water are ecological elements, but also cosmological and mythological elements, alongside air and earth. Medieval systems of humors and alchemy address the four elements, as do traditional pagan forms of worship, and the tattva system. Di Prima underwent significant meditation on tattvas in the 1970s, evidenced by her collage journals, which show extensive pages of symbols and meditative writing. Meditating on fire and water in "Revolutionary Letter #49" in this context reads not only as ecological and technological, but also as a project of myth-making and making sacred the experience of the world.

This symbolic aspect is important to di Prima's ultimate project in blending systems of knowledge, seen in "Revolutionary Letter #53" and its approach to alchemy. This process becomes especially visible in a copy of the poem that appears in one of Diane di Prima's dream journals, at the University of North Carolina, Chapel-Hill. The poem as it appears in *Revolutionary Letters* is written out, with an image of an atomic explosion collaged below it. On the image of the explosion, a vivid mix of yellow and red against a black background, di Prima has inked symbols of the four elements, including signs for mercury, the sun and moon, as well as planets in a geometric pattern. The next page of the dream journal features more drawing and journaling on the four elements, including color correspondences, emotional correspondences, and symbols for each element (marked "for Loba"). In her teaching at the San Francisco Institute for Magical and Healing Arts (SIMHA), di Prima was known for classes that incorporated the four elements as the basis for understanding the Kabbalistic Tree of Life and the system of the Tarot; thus, their presence here

signals an entry point to far vaster systems of knowledge in di Prima's cosmology. In this capacity, the lessons of di Prima's "How to Become a Walking Alchemical Experiment" extend far beyond the ecological era they vivify, and translate on a symbolic level to even greater streams of knowledge.

In this world of correspondences, if we reconsider "Revolutionary Letter #49": despite the magic of the washing machine, or of the electric lightbulb, these inventions rely on an initial diversion, by way of technology, of one of the four elements. While this diversion may be possible for a time, it relies on altering fundamental building blocks of cosmological matter that are disposed to return to their original forms. Human technologies can divert or alter only momentarily—the real project of the elements and their possibilities unfolds on a cosmological scale. Understanding the material qualities of this process, their contemporaneous political context, and their deeply rooted history allow us to envision the revolutionary contribution of di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* to midcentury American knowledge-making.

Chapter 5: Diane di Prima's Occult Library

In "Some Notes on Maximus," Robert Creeley contextualizes Olson's use of sources, arguing that "the use of historical materials in *Maximus* will not be realized until one understands that they are being brought into a context of the *present*—no one is 'going back' to them, nor is there any question of the 'good old days'" (Creeley 114). Likewise, in his essay "Gnostic O," Kenneth Warren notes that "Olson's efforts to reach back to Sumer, to Pleistocene, and to races of men who existed before the dawn of history is not really an attempt to escape from the West but rather a variation of Western occult tradition" (346). This same approach may readily be applied to di Prima's own use of historical materials, as with alchemy in *Revolutionary Letters*—historical knowledge is animated by the present and does not constitute an escape from it. In Diane di Prima's hands, alchemy as a historical subject offers a way to understand the political climate of midcentury America, marred by ecological and humanitarian crises, and increasingly marked by government-based and university policies that sought to fracture knowledge by field.

The deftness with which she addresses alchemical themes in her work speaks not just to her work as poet, but also a researcher; di Prima, like Charles Olson, is a voracious reader and 'istorian with decades of experience. For instance, projects like *Seven Love Poems from the Middle Latin,* published by Poets Press in 1965, are not titled evocatively. Di Prima translated Middle Latin works into a facing-page book of poetry, publishing the volume herself after its first publisher, Simon & Schuster, failed to deliver. She remembers working "hours every day" among "Latin texts and dictionaries and a reference grammar," "often uncovering the hidden sexual meaning of a metaphor, or a place where a stanza or two had likely been cut in copying by a prudish monk" (*Recollections* 295). This type of intellectual and poetic work does not come without research, familiarity, and effort. Likewise, di Prima's teaching schedules from New College in California, the San Francisco Institute

of Magical and Healing Arts, and other workshops show that beyond her devotion to poetry as a craft, she has assembled a formidable body of knowledge in her lifetime.

The questions of sources and research are essential to contextualizing di Prima's intellectual genealogy, particularly in relation to her reworking of "the progression of European thought" as a means of answering the question of how historical knowledge can be activated in the present moment. In "The Birth of Loba," she lists:

> Paganism, Gnosticism, alchemy and then what—where do we go. Way-seeking Mind, "that which is creative must create itself." I want to say that the old religion and the old forms that we're all studying with such total devoutness—Eastern and Western—they have a lot of information and they have a lot of the means, but where we're all going they haven't mapped yet. We're mapping it now—or it's mapping us. If Buddha really had done it, we wouldn't be here. (444)

Here, di Prima draws on her decades-long training as a Buddhist—in both the Zen and Tibetan traditions—to engage the idea of "way-seeking mind," or the principle of the self that is motivated to look for something larger, greater, or "more than." She contrasts devoutness towards the past with the ongoing indeterminacy of the past, noting importantly that the question of the future is being mapped by us, or mapping us, since no single knowledge system (such as Buddhism) has satisfactorily projected a way forward. In this dimension, di Prima does not reify mythological, spiritual, or historical knowledge—in what Alicia Ostriker might call the nostalgia-based "Modernist mythmaking of Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Auden" who place faith in the past as a "repository of truth, goodness, or desirable social organization" (87). Ostriker, in her work on Alta, Atwood, Plath, Sexton, and H.D., articulates that women writers in the twentieth century who heavily address mythology in their work do so by "treat[ing] existing texts as fence posts surrounding the terrain of

mythic truth but by no means identical to it," as "enactments of feminist antiauthoritarianism opposed to the patriarchal praxis of reifying texts" (87). Within her own paradigm, di Prima focuses on the generative possibilities of what these knowledge systems have yet to delineate that we—by mapping or being mapped—must actively co-create.

While Diane di Prima's life is characterized by in-depth research and knowledge-building in a variety of fields, she credits Robert Duncan with the impetus to dive deeper than before on the topic of "hidden religions," or occulted practices. In particular, New College was a site to teach not just poetry as a subject, or poetry writing as a practice, but *poetics*: in an interview with David Meltzer for *San Francisco Beat* (2001), di Prima notes that the unique contribution of New College was its dedication to exploring "what a curriculum in poetics—as opposed to one in writing poetry—would be and what it would constitute" (18). The question of *poetics*, and the ways that it blended research, intuition, and technique was not a settled idea between faculty at New College. Di Prima recounts a class visit from Robert Duncan:

> Toward the end of the class there was a general discussion, and I don't know what came up, but he said 'I don't want to see the whole picture, I just want to see my little piece that I have to work on, and just work on that little piece, I don't want to see the whole thing.' And I said, 'I want to know, I want to know it all, even if I never pick up a pen again.' (Hadbawnik)

This expansiveness, this desire to *know* and understand complete systems, echoes di Prima's exploration of cosmology and cosmogony in *Revolutionary Letters*, as well as her desire to yoke alchemical knowledge to her present moment; "I want to know it all" is a beautiful statement of

seeking. While di Prima's poetry offers ample evidence of this expansiveness as a fundamental part of her *poetics*, there is an additional material source that gives us insight: her occult library.

The Library

As a publisher, printer, and poet, books have always been precious currency to Diane di Prima. She recounts that once, Fielding Dawson "left at my house a priceless collection of poetry books from Black Mountain College: early Creeley and Olson texts which I perused, and in some cases copied poem by poem, entire on my electric typewriter…So when I gave them back I would still have a copy for myself" (*Recollections* 186). The preciousness of those words, to warrant the painstaking act of typing them out, attests to the importance of possessing a material copy to revisit, explore, and learn further from. After years of working in bookshops, often performing cataloging duties, as well as printing countless books, di Prima had a network of places she could turn to keep feeding her hunger for knowledge that was always just shy of twentieth-century mainstream—Paracelsus, crystals, Crowley, early mythology, Buddhist traditions, Julian of Norwich.

Diane di Prima's overarching library, or all the books that she owns, is part of the structure of her whole house. In a flashback dated May 15, 1995, in *Recollections*, di Prima writes:

> As I write about leaving Topanga Canyon in 1963, my own household in San Francisco is under siege: a new owner is trying to evict us and move into my pad. I mentally see my four thousand books in labeled boxes, me trying to manage that, to find what I need when I need it in a great catacombs of "storage"…Now there is a storm about me, storm of regret, storm of definition and redefinition of lifestyles for myself, for my partner, Sheppard. We stare at each other down long corridors of Art.

> Or stand silent in rooms whose walls are awash in books...Which life to salvage out of the many that surround us. (*Recollections* 345-346)

While di Prima was thankfully able to stay in her home, this quote indicates the scope of her book-collecting project: "four thousand books," which she dreads the thought of "trying to manage" as a "great catacombs." Indeed, di Prima's house is "awash in books," and her personification of their energies as "life" that requires salvaging speaks to the intimacy of her relationship with books that has spanned her lifetime.

In the midst of her treasure trove, di Prima conceives of a particular subset of books as specifically her "occult library." While this library is not an artifact—it remains very much in use, and a few volumes reside throughout the house—the occult library is stowed almost exclusively on custom-built shelves in di Prima's garage, carefully arranged by topic over hundreds of volumes. It has the canonical texts one might associate with mysticism and occult practices in the twentieth century—Aleister Crowley, Rudolf Steiner, Frances Yates, and George Gurdjieff. And on the first few shelves alone, materials address how to read the tarot, gemstones and crystals, medieval hermeticism, Atlantis, Egyptology, the Dogon, medieval female mystics, Meister Eckhart, Gnosticism, and biblical apocrypha. While cataloging, one is likely to get lost in a handbook on practical magic, or while peering at di Prima's annotations. The material is unique in the first place, but as with the Maud/Olson Library, the opportunity to browse it in person creates a web of unprecedented connections.

Beyond this physical distinctness of shelving (excepting books that have migrated upstairs, for the poet's use), di Prima marks this facet of her library as conceptually distinct. Written in di Prima's hand, on the back of a cardboard shipping box packed with newspaper clippings and chapbooks from Timothy Leary in prison, is the label "Pamphlets + Book by Timothy Leary," and

the instruction "add to occult lib @ house."[37] She conceives of her collection as a "reference library" that she intends to keep together indefinitely, at her home and possibly within a larger institution.[38] Like any poet's library, we might infer that it contains materials di Prima has used for teaching, writing poetry, researching for lectures—the "do[ing] the stuff" that allows poetry to flow freely through her.

The fact that the Library exists in material form—not just as a bibliography of sources, but as manifold media—Xeroxes, chapbooks from friends, print books, handwritten passages, drawings, scrapbooks, and other material—suggests an aspect of its creation. The themes represented in the Library range from Atlantis to healing crystals, Aleister Crowley to the Old Icelandic sagas, *soma* ritual to Julian of Norwich, and beyond—genres and themes that were not always easily accessible and remain so today, even in an age before internet book sales and search engines that dramatically change the way we assemble book-based knowledge.

Di Prima traces the conceptual genesis of her occult library, to 1976 when she lived in Ranchos de Taos, and spent hot summer afternoons meditating on the Tarot, dreaming, and working with visualization. Before then in 1971, she taught herself cabala, and by the 1980s, when she was teaching at New College in San Francisco, this intuitive approach grew into an "understanding of how it wove itself into European consciousness, and which parts came at which point" (Hadbawnik). While books accumulated through the decades, likely one of the first significant additions to this particular collection is di Prima's full set of *The Golden Bough*, including all thirteen volumes, dated "Christmas 1960."[39] Thus, the collection is a least, on a material level, at

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[37] Diane di Prima's occult library, shelves.
[38] Conversation with Diane di Prima, April 1st, 2018. San Francisco.
[39] Despite the date of inscription, di Prima describes it as a birthday gift from 1961, in fourteen volumes, that she used to prepare for her first Winter Solstice ritual in Cooper Square, New York (*Recollections* 370).

least half a century in the making, and likely longer: di Prima recounts that when she left Swarthmore, she used their bookstore to purchase numerous books on credit, including Pound's *Cantos*. In this dimension, we might read this library like di Prima's other poetic projects—morphing over decades, with material traces to attest.

We might trace the beginning of the occult library's impulse even further back, to 1956 when di Prima first visited Ezra Pound in St. Elizabeth's hospital. In *Recollection of My Life as a Woman*, she recounts a lesson on cultural preservation that she learned early in her life as a poet while visiting him:

> Ezra told us of copying Vivaldi scores in the library of the Dresden Museum, copying them for Olga Rudge, his love. When the Museum was destroyed in the bombing of Dresden, they were the only copies of those scores that remained. They were being transcribed even as we spoke about them.
>
> Stories like this made a deep impression on me. They made me realize that what is saved, the shards we call civilization, is saved by a few. By people photographing, or copying by hand. Today as I sit here writing at my computer, I think of the library I've put together since then, the alchemy books old and new I've xeroxed for students. Stuff I've copied by hand. How much of that came out of the Vivaldi story. (*Recollections* 144)

"The library I've put together since then" refers to di Prima's occult library, framing its construction as an act of archival preservation that preserves "the shards we call civilization." This type of message, from Ezra Pound, is particularly unique, given his role in poetry around the second World War. As the only American tried for treason in World War Two, Pound was held as a political prisoner by his own government for thirteen years, stemming from demonstrations of fascist

ideology on radio broadcasts in Rome and later from charges of insanity. While Pound was held in St. Elizabeth's, the United States government was hurriedly hiring ex-Nazi scientists and organizers at a rapid pace after the war concluded. Alcalay notes, "never a real trial, the Pound case played an important cultural, historical, and political role" that "established the shadowy image of the poet through whom art's relationship to politics can be administered and cordoned off, and used as a surrogate form of debate" (129).[40]

Within this larger context, Pound's presence in poetry, and indeed di Prima's and Olson's life during the 1940s and 1950s, reveals critical moments in their poetic development: both di Prima and Olson visited Ezra Pound in St. Elizabeth's Hospital early on in each of their respective lives as poets—Olson after resigning from the Office of War Information, and di Prima in 1956 after having corresponded with him for a few years. Di Prima remembers her visit to Ezra Pound fondly in *Recollections*, noting his generosity and courtesy to her and her poet friends while also observing the intense racism of Washington D.C. at the time (145); Olson's memory, consolidated in the volume, *Charles Olson & Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeth's* and edited by Catherine Seelye, is more vexed, although Olson dedicates his first major work, *Call Me Ishmael*, to the poet. Both Olson and di Prima, despite their acknowledgment of Pound's "collapse of judgment brought about by hate" does not cause them to jettison his prior work, including his *ABC of Reading* that proved so influential to the next generation of poets (*An Encounter at St. Elizabeths*). Their relationships with him, primarily of poetic lineage, remained critical sites of inquiry for both Olson and di Prima in their own poetics. Within the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill archives, one of the largest repositories of di

[40] For more thorough investigation of this, see Christopher Simpson's *Blowback* (Collier Books, Macmillan 1989).

Prima's archives other than her own home, a single postcard from Pound to di Prima states: "All I can do is wish you luck, can't guarantee it, E.P.".[41]

Thus, it may be not so much Pound's exact notion of what deserved to be saved, but the weight of his poetic vision that necessitated poets intervening in the very cultural record during war that seemed to last a lifetime. In Ed Sanders' *Investigative Poetics*, the work begins with a definition: "that poetry / should again assume responsibility / for the description of history" (6). Through a modernist poetic lineage, and alongside poets like Sanders, Olson, and many others, di Prima learned quickly: in order to describe that history, you might need to save it yourself. Doing so is a matter of political urgency, so that knowledge itself does not get destroyed as collateral for global warfare.

While the occult library demonstrates this political urgency, its development speaks to the intuitive mind of its maker. The collection spans hundreds of volumes and shelves upon shelves of books, but it was not built for a singular purpose. The books in the library result not out of need, but desire: to know, to explore, to deepen the possibilities of di Prima's poetry and classroom. In particular, "Hidden Religions" was di Prima's signature class at New College in the Poetics Program, covering Paracelsus, Hieronymus Bosch, Greek Philosophy, Gnosticism, and Indo-European goddess mythology.[42] On a copy of a syllabus for this course, at the very end, she writes an initialed "Note About "Clumps:"" "One might say that each clump is the center of a node from which excursions radiate in various asymmetrical directions."[43] Thus, the topics and themes of "Hidden Religions" remained open to excursions, explorations, and diversions based on what they sparked in

[41] This postcard is housed in the Diane di Prima Papers at University of North Carolina Chapel-Hill, but transcribed and mentioned in her Charles Olson Memorial Lectures (first lecture) at Buffalo in 1985.
[42] From Hidden Religions folder, "Hidden Religions: Reading List for Fall Semester." Digital document from Ammiel Alcalay's digital archive of Diane di Prima materials.
[43]From Hidden Religions folder, "Syllabus." Digital document from Ammiel Alcalay's digital archive of Diane di Prima materials.

both student and teacher: a hallmark of the occult library, as well, and similar to the way that Ed Dorn frames a good bibliography (as a kind of map) in his Charles Olson Memorial Lectures.

Given this commitment to pleasure and intuition, di Prima's library evolved through accumulating elements over decades, with openness to new acquisitions rather than a strict collecting style. She notes that she bought some volumes for her course on Hidden Religions, out of general curiosity, and out of relationships with people like Louis Collins who would help locate books.[44] The collection formed organically, books that friends sent (accounting for the high volume of signed first editions in her overall library), books purchased for others, or books purchased for pleasure. Given di Prima's history as a printer, it is unsurprising that community would serve as a fundamental source for her collection.

In *Recollections*, di Prima recounts the intuitive way in which she has encountered certain occult texts, and thus, how they may have made their way into her collection. She describes encountering a silver locket that contained a small carved skull, likely made in Tibet, and feeling a mysterious attraction to the object. She recounts:

> one day, as I...star[ed] into the carved eye-sockets of the tiny skull, I heard/saw the word MILAREPA in my head. Had no idea what it meant, but noted it down. It took me a week to get around to it, but I went to visit my old friend, the magus of stage lights, Nicola Cernovich, at Orientalia Bookstore where he worked—it was then the only place in town to find out about things Eastern—and asked him, 'What's a Milarepa?"...[he] pulled a beautiful boxed two-volume hardcover set off the shelf and handed it to me. *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. (*Recollections* 387)

[44] Conversation with Diane di Prima, March 28th, 2018. San Francisco.

In this sense, we might consider the way di Prima collects books as directly related to her poetic practice, listening closely to the strong voice of her intuition and using this as a means of discovery. Her occult library makes good on the promise of her poetry: "the work is part of the life…what you don't control is the spirit, the voices, coming through you" (*Recollections* 224). For di Prima, the voice might bring poems, or it might bring the next thing to read. Intuition is a force for connecting di Prima's instinctive knowledge (MILAREPA) with its material counterpoints in the world (the book itself).

The purpose of the occult library, and of di Prima's materials on the whole, is not to develop a collection for show or sale, although di Prima's time working in printing and also at the Phoenix Book Shop means she is familiar with the particulars of the rare book and archives market. Instead, for di Prima, books are meant to be used. She notes that the first proprietor of the Phoenix Book Shop discouraged her regular habit of reading first editions with breakfast and coffee, but for di Prima, books are always meant to be read.[45] This fundamental quality—that books are meant to be used—dovetails with di Prima's deep sense of archival responsibility. Thus, while di Prima's poetic works, such as *Revolutionary Letters* crystallize occulted knowledge as a way to transfer it to the reader, her Library functions as a material, embodied spine.

Archival preservation constantly toes the line of completion, absences, silences, omissions. Many of the books in this Library, especially the prolific section on crystals, are preoccupied with questions of completeness not from a perspective of comprehensiveness, but rather wholeness as a spiritual and mystical state. After all, di Prima's occult library is not yet in its final form, and life circumstances continue to alter what it could have been and what it will be. For instance, di Prima notes that after Soren Agenoux watched one of her New York City apartments, the majority of her floor-to-ceiling bookshelves were empty, with not a "single art book left on the shelves…every art

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[45] Conversation with Diane di Prima, April 1st, 2018. San Francisco.

book I had ever managed to get my hands on had been sold" (*Recollections* 329). Who knows if these materials might have joined the occult library or another "wing" of di Prima's collection? Likewise, her recollection of Alan Marlowe's fundamental betrayal—throwing out two boxes "full of letters from my friends from the early days…and the other held my journals, starting from when I was fourteen and wrote the "No day without a line" notebooks"—highlights the archival resources that no institution will ever recover (*Recollections* 285). Di Prima remembers the importance of books as currency, especially during lean times, such as selling first editions of *Howl* and *Gasoline* to pay the electric bill for the Poets Theatre for a show that evening.[46] Di Prima's libraries thus are shaped by the requirements of her life, even as they reflect aspects of her poetic and readerly practices.

Yet, in its current form, di Prima's library recovers and preserves occulted knowledge, especially related to wholeness as a type of healing, rather than archival concept. For di Prima, with Xeroxed books, handwritten manuscripts, workbooks, and evidence of active reading, this process is part of the practice, a spiritual devotion to "doing the work" that enables the poetry to come. Like her poetry, it resists conclusions—focusing on "the process, the bloody process" (Libby 47, quoting di Prima in 1976). This structuring echoes di Prima's *ars poetica*, from *Recollections*: "THE REQUIREMENTS OF OUR LIFE IS THE FORM OF OUR ART"—in which "art" can be substituted for "library." If the Library is the temple, her poetry is the liturgy—the crystallization of how poetic transmission—through dictation, through "being open to the stuff" synthesizes and preserves knowledge traditions that would otherwise be erased. Or even how it preserves the self-knowledge of our own experiences (or others before us) that our conscious minds can scarcely acknowledge. In the spirit of "women's alchemy, quick arms / to pull down walls," our arms might also pull down, one at a time, di Prima's careful collection of books. And the knowledge they contain, but also stir within us, will crack the mortar.

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[46] Diane di Prima, "Phoenix Memories." Digital manuscript, from Ammiel Alcalay's digital archive.

Library and Poems

In the world of special collections, book dealers, and archives brokers, libraries belonging to poets are notoriously difficult to include within a sale of literary papers. Often, there must be demonstrable and material proof of annotation, rare volumes, or "research value" within the library itself. Di Prima's occult library, while valuable as a resource in its own right, does feature extensive annotation, some of the most striking of which directly informs her poetics. Of special note is her copy of *Comfortable Words for Christ's Lovers* by Lady Julian of Norwich, inscribed as follows:

C. R A.

d. d. G. A. A.

Norwich

Jan – July 1918

For Diane di Prima from W.H. Auden via Bob Wilson.

G. A. A. is our Auden's father. He gave it to Charles Auden, Wystan's older brother, who then gave it to Wystan. I got it from Auden when I bought his library, and now I give it to you. Who next in the chain?

Love,

Bob March 1975

Bob Wilson, owner of Phoenix Book Shop, was a friend of di Prima's and a book dealer—who is also largely responsible for a variety of her materials that are located at the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature in The New York Public Library. While the item is remarkable in that it places di Prima in direct poetic lineage with Auden and his family, under

the auspices of reading medieval mysticism, conversation with di Prima reveals further nuance (though Wilson's gift does seem to fracture another poet's library!). She remembers reading this copy, and how in the process of reading it she envisioned a poem that became part of *Loba*, an image of a white unicorn erupting between two lines of text.[47] In this sense, Auden's former book not only places di Prima in poetic lineage, but becomes a substrate upon which to perform her work. *Loba* in particular, a poem that incorporates extensive source-based knowledge of pre-Christian western traditions, hermeticism, and Greco-Roman mythology alongside di Prima's own intuitive approaches, is a prime work to receive dictation from in the context of an occult library.

In fact, we might compare certain elements of the very composition of *Loba* as a poetic work and the library as an act informed by a similar poetics. One of the features of both the publication and editorial history of the poem is that it was composed chronologically, with no "map," as it were, to sketch out the dimensions of the poems or their narrative or thematic arcs. Di Prima describes this process at length in a June 2, 1976 reading at the Bay Area Writers series at Novato, California, which the Allen Ginsberg Project has transcribed in two parts on its blog. In this reading, she comments on the nature of the writing process:

> I never really made any plan for what shape it was going to take and the first four parts kind of evolved themselves in an order and they got to be notions on my part of what I wanted to do. As soon as they became notions, the poem veered in opposite directions to the notions, constantly, so that I have parts that exactly fit my notion of what I wanted to do next and then other parts that are just the next insistent part of the poem, and how part five and part six are going to eventually

[47] Conversation with Diane di Prima, April 1st, 2018. San Francisco.

> shape up [this is 1976]. I don't know. But I'm just going to read odd pieces from it, from the first parts, not in any particular…I mean, I'll go in order through the manuscript, but I won't read, like, page one. two, three, and four, I'll, like, you know, flip through, until I find something I want to read – That's…And I'll probably start to read low and read things that take more energy later because I'm still driving the freeway, if that's ok with you guys. (Allen Ginsberg Project)

By the 1978 Wingbow edition, this sentiment of "still driving the freeway" in the compositional process of the poem remains: an author's note states:

> The Work is, like they say, in "progress".
> The author reserves the right to juggle, re-arrange,
> cut, osterize, re-cycle parts of the poem in future editions.
> As the Loba wishes, as the Goddess dictates.

Roseanne Giannini Quinn takes this note as a "secret handshake…where di Prima sets forth a way of writing that destabilizes conventional ways of reading," cautioning that "we should not get too comfortable with any ideas of "master" narrative here" (22). Indeed, this opening note changes the nature of the poem to a living creature with a pulse, rather than an artifact to be examined. This shift is particularly important in light of the question of sources or bibliography, and the tracings of various allusions or references throughout the work. It advises: best not to get bogged down in the details, but rather, to watch for movement, breath, the living line.

This aliveness also appears on the pages of di Prima's library, especially since certain poems are directly inscribed in the books themselves. Considering di Prima's entire library, many poems are likely contained in the books. She recounts teaching Charles Olson's poetry in 1976, and receiving a dictated poem for her ongoing work *Loba*, which she rediscovered in her notes in 1978 as she prepared the Wingbow Press edition: it was jotted down in her copy of Olson's *Selected Writings*

("Old Father, Old Artificer" 16). In her occult library, in *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth, Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer. Harper and Row, New York, 1983), di Prima writes a poem on the verso of a page of the index:

> Before the first days, when no one numbered
> the moons
> Before the first nights, when no one numbered
> the hills
> When no one mapped the rivers, or
> set sand on the seas
> From the steppes she came
> From the place of tall grass she came
> From the inland desert she came
> She rode a lion
> Arrows she brought w/ her, arrows
> She rode a lion
> A sword she carried, a flail
> She carried the measuring rod
> The ray of the sun at her back
> She came to the sea

Evocative of themes within *Loba*—evoking ancient, dream-like landscapes and the women who stride over them, the presence of an alchemical lion as means of conveyance and ceremony, a juxtaposition between earthly elements in sea, desert, sky, and grass. The presence of the "measuring rod" is significant: this item, while its purpose varies across cultures, is often considered a device for measuring the dimensions of sacred sites or as a protective talisman that is found in premodern to early modern burials. Between "sword," "flail," (or threshing device), and "measuring rod," the woman in the poem holds powerful symbols of strength, fertility, and sacredness as she walks her mythic landscape. This poem, as a type of talisman, is particularly potent in its scarcity: it does not appear to be published and within this book it achieves its only embodied presence in the world, as dictated to Diane di Prima whose hand laid it on the page.

This poem, alongside the story of dictation between the lines of Auden's Julian of Norwich, gives a distinctly mystical edge to the singularity of the occult library. Just as with the Maud/Olson

Library, we might think of all objects within a literary collection, even those that are meant to attest to a theme such as Charles Olson's reading, contain their own distinct materiality that leads in different vectors (such as annotations by another hand, or unopened pages in a library meant to symbolize what has been read). For di Prima, the materiality of her Library is special, specialized. It allows us to experience the source texts that inform her poetry, without over-determining a path for negotiating how the bibliographic and the poetic inform each other. Its annotations offer us correspondences and invite us to produce our own; its bespoke indexes honor ways of producing knowledge that are specific to di Prima and hold possibilities for future readers. And, at times, we are welcomed into specific vectors that lead us to *Loba*, as well as di Prima's other poetic projects.

Some Qualities of Diane di Prima's Occult Library

In its current moment, we might understand the Library as a project that is quite like her poems—a chronological accumulation of material that slowly reveals patterns, and a collation of material meaning, accumulated and accumulating over decades. Importantly, like these works, the library is ongoing, some of its parts scattered throughout di Prima's house, some books certainly yet to be acquired as part of the fabric of di Prima's intellect and daily life. The Library itself contains a dizzying variety of materials, worth describing in terms of the larger material categories they embody, but also in terms of themes and genres represented. Of course, given the ongoing nature of the Library, it is too soon to produce any sort of inventory or definitive statement. The books are actively being used, collected, circulated, and annotated. However, a few preliminary themes reveal the value of the collection di Prima has assembled.

Some books are printed very recently, with spines still firmly intact to suggest they have yet to be read or ingested. Some books certainly qualify as rare, in the provenance of special collections—especially those from the late nineteenth century, or small press chapbooks like Jack

Hirschman's translation of Eliphas Levi's *Dove Rose*, autographed and signed to di Prima in May 1979. Still others are photocopies or facsimiles of medieval or early modern texts, spiral bound and labeled by di Prima. Given her reflections on Pound's Vivaldi, the relatively frequent occurrence of materials she has Xeroxed and bound herself indicates the need to preserve the knowledge of the book in some material form (without fetishizing the authority of a publisher's printing or binding). To this end, the library contains numerous books that have been copied, placed in binders or binding, and then thoroughly annotated—such as *The Nature of Substance*, by Rudolf Hauschka (translated from the German by Mary T. Richards and Marjorie Spock, London, Vincent Stuart LTD, 1966), which di Prima heavily annotates for correspondences between metals, definitions of scientific terminology, and observations on matter. The form that these non-book media might take can also appear highly ephemeral, such as a printout on the Irish *soma* ritual that sits in a folder with eight pages of notes taken on a yellow legal pad, titled "Peter Lamborn Wilson 7/26/94 Celts + Soma." Even more ephemerally, there are items such as an extensive typed book outline with notes, titled *Women's Work: The Lives of the Great Women Alchemists*, although no information exists on author or publisher, and it is difficult to determine whether the book exists or was perhaps a plan for one by di Prima or another scholar.

Still other materials challenge the idea of a reference library as a static place for print materials; di Prima's teaching notes intermingle with writings on ritual and magical practice. The collection holds a booklet, dated 1985, of a three-night ritual for the "Gold Circle"—a group of practitioners, including Diane di Prima, her partner Sheppard Powell, who have met regularly since 1978 to "investigate through group visualization the five elements and twenty-five subelements and the Major Arcana of the Tarot."[48] In the booklet, di Prima's hand (dated 1985) notes that the

[48] Berg Coll Di Prima ZC6 S26 1985, Spring 1985. SF Inst. of Magical + Healing Arts. Classes, Workshops, and Intensives.

worksheets are constructed from her notebooks and journals for Gold Circle members only, cautioning new students against using them. Items like this demonstrate the ongoing and iterative nature of these materials; the booklet contains a revised 1986 section. And, materials like this, which enumerate performance and ritual, often leave other archival traces: di Prima's collage notebooks from the 1970s and 1980s contain photographs of the ritual described in the booklet.

To consider the more theoretical dimensions of the library: if we take the Maud/Olson Library as both an embodiment of Charles "Olson's brain," to use Gregor Gibson's term, as well as a conceptual unit for unique materials that lead in a variety of vectors away from their original subject (such as the rare Yeats editions, never read, in Maud's collection of Olson's reading), di Prima's occult library has a similar dimension. For instance, di Prima's hand is not the only one in the collection. Certain used books, with bright yellow highlighter, contain annotations not in di Prima's own hand—sometimes even inscribed to others. Still others' inscriptions reveal they are gifts to di Prima: Mary Greer, influential author of Tarot manuals, inscribes a copy of *Tarot for Yourself* (1984) to Diane, thanking her for poetry, conversation, and teachings (Diane di Prima Library). That a famed Tarot writer would learn from di Prima's own work with Tarot is not a surprise to those who know with di Prima, or took one of her numerous Tarot-focused workshops in San Francisco. Thus, in this instance, while the nature of the collection suggest the variety of acquisition as vectors into material conditions beyond the physicality of the library itself—used books, gifts from friends, print-outs, handwritten notebooks—it is nevertheless di Prima's at its core, replete with her writing, her ephemera, and her knowledge-building project.

In this spirit, the occult library has been a living collection from its inception, in the spirit of the coffee cups and first editions from di Prima's Phoenix Book Shop days. Many of her books contain multiple items used for bookmarks—some paper towels, bookstore-branded bookmarks, a flyer for her son's piano instruction service, pressed flowers, a folded page here and there, marking a

silent process of reading. The ephemera further speaks to di Prima's lesson from Pound's Vivaldi—capturing fragments that give a sense of her lived experience, that if not for their repurposed use as bookmarks, would otherwise not survive.

Annotation

As with the Maud/Olson Library, annotation can be a difficult metric to analyze textual engagement. While annotation almost certainly indicates a book has been read, the annotation may evidence another type of practice; di Prima casts the I Ching on a letter repurposed for scrap paper and a bookmark in Henry Corbin's *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran* (Bolligen Series, University of Princeton Press 1976). Likewise, an absence of annotation does not necessarily mean a book has not been read. For instance, di Prima has clearly read Boehme extensively—marginal notes about him appear throughout her collection—but her copies of Boehme are not annotated.

With this in mind, almost every book contains some sign of having been opened and explored, and dust jackets are often used as bookmarks to mark this process. And in the collection, there are items with significant annotation. This generally takes the form of underlined passages, stars next to key points, argumentation in the margin, and even entire flyleafs or inside covers annotated with summaries, questions, and other divergences. In particular, margins will often feature the annotation "HR"—as in the case of *The Chalice & the Blade*, by Riane Eisler—which demarcates material relevant to "Hidden Religions," di Prima's extensive course at New College.

A general characteristic of these annotations is di Prima's detailed engagement with the intellectual premises and historical details of the works she annotates. She is an incisive reader who corrects, questions, and elaborates in the margins to the edification of both herself and any given book's author. Of the influential *History of Magic* by Eliphas Levi, di Prima writes in a lower margin:

"The errors this man makes are incredible" (91). Later in the book, in a chapter that purports to address "The Magic of Public Workshop," di Prima writes "He places the shackles on his own wrist" and notes "Too bad this chapter has had so little to do with public worship" (131). Di Prima is not hesitant to call out lack of rigor or flaws in the materials she reads. Of Dion Fortune's *The Esoteric Orders and Their Works* (introduction Gareth Knight, Llewellyn Publications 1971), she writes "racist" in the margin next to a statement that describes white men as masters in the "First Emigration Tradition" of the "Three Great Traditions" (47). Occultism and esotericism are not without their elements of cultural appropriation, racism, and sexism, and di Prima's annotations show awareness and engagement in challenging these features in her own research.

Roger K.G. Temple's *The Sirius Mystery*, (St Martin's Press, NY 1976), is largely unannotated except on the back flyleaf, which is fully annotated with di Prima's criticisms of the work:

> Lack of imagination…no knowledge of alchemy / or the importance of transformation/transmutation…does understand the "bow & arrow" as symbols of astral travel...nor that the stars themselves & the gods derive from the numbers: hence the triple goddess the 50 yr orbit of Sirius B, the necessity to never be too accurate as this wd lead to all material creation being subsumed into Number. He's also suffering from classicism-insists on bringing it all back home to Egypt, Sumer, Greece when obviously the traditional is purer + more meaty among the Dogon.

Temple's failures boil down to short-sightedness and narrow-mindedness in di Prima's estimation—too stuck in a disciplinary tradition to examine more relevant and less Western sources, not to mention occult traditions such as alchemy, di Prima notes that the combined lack of research and "imagination" mean that he is unable to see the patterns (such as Sirius B's orbit) and their cultural

consequences. This type of critique reveals di Prima's strengths as a historian and critic—an ability to read across traditions, patterns, and rituals to consider relationships between humans and divinity, as well as the diligence required to read occulted knowledge sources that thicken the possibilities of historical research. She enumerates her criticism on the back flyleaf of the book, as a type of reference or indexing device—which I will explore at greater length shortly. Yet, as an annotation style, this pattern-sensing insight shines through in *Loba* and considers what type of poetic experience or knowledge might be produced by intermingling traditions across time, instead of consolidating them to their narrow geographic and historical windows.

At the same time, di Prima's annotations are not limited to the book or topic at hand. At times, her annotations function on a meditative level that captures experience beyond the book's covers. A blank page in Aleister Crowley's *Book of Thoth*, one of the most heavily annotated books in the collection, lists the following:

<u>The Things to Be Done</u>

Ajapa breathing

Meditation

Walking

Study (language / poetics —> alchemy — healing / tarot / kabala)

Writing

Makko-Ho

Piano

Drawing

Correspondence

These "things to be done" echo the "no single thing, no singular purpose" of di Prima's library in the daily rhythms of her own life; the task of staying open to the poetry as it comes requires a variety of efforts, some physical (Ajapa breathing, Makko-Ho, walking), some social (correspondence), some spiritual (meditation), some intellectual or creative (writing, drawing, piano, etc)—but none of these activities fall neatly into a single category of benefit. Rather, the "things to be done" always exist in complex interrelation with each other, achieving wholeness in di Prima herself, and even more so, in the reception of the poem. The occult library can have no singular purpose or benefit, because like everything else that di Prima does, the maxim remains: do the work, and the rest will follow.

Symbol and Correspondence

An entire shelf is devoted to the works of Aleister Crowley, whose *Book of Thoth* and *Tarot Divination* are both highly annotated. Di Prima taught workshops on using the Crowley Tarot Deck—in a copy of Mary Greer's *Tarot for Your Self*, a flyer is inserted as a bookmark that advertises a course on the Tree of Life Tarot Spread, noting that this one-day workshop, offered on February 6th (no year noted) and taught by di Prima, "is a prerequisite for the **Thoth Deck Study Group**" set to begin a new series on the twentieth of February. In the Crowley section are three notebooks of di Prima's, with handwritten notes that meditation on the correspondences of symbols, images, plants, Hebrew alphabet, planets, and days of the week. These notebooks appear to function not entirely as reference, but perhaps more specifically as a writing meditation or workbooks. In them, the purpose does not seem to drill down and necessarily "master" knowledge, but constantly process it, intermingling knowledge traditions and forms into a unique understanding forged by di Prima herself.

A significant portion of the books in the library address visual history, including sacred geometry, inscriptions, symbols, hieroglyphics, the Hebrew alphabet, and Islamic patterns. Patterns, proportion, and correspondences between inner and outer worlds of knowledge predominate the visual terrain of di Prima's library—rather than maps, geographies, or the history of art movements (although the Library does not exclude any of these subjects). When considering the compositional process of di Prima's work, in which poems are received, chronologically and thematically unfurling over the course of decades as the poem dictates, one considers the question of organization and proportion. How to remain perceptive to these incoming forces, while at the same time, rendering them legible?

Indeed, many of di Prima's annotations are designed to draw parallels across traditions, matching symbols with words, and archetypes with their many iterations, to build a density of knowledge across traditions. In Dion Fortune's *The Mystical Qabalah* (London, Ernest Benn 1970, first published 1935), di Prima annotates the margins with planetary symbols, turning the prose that describes the four elements and their planetary correspondences into equations. These equations, while they function as mnemonic devices, are accompanied by extensive annotation in Crowley's *Tarot Divination*, which has, at times, entire pages of symbols that illustrate the correspondences between elements, planets, and principles of the Tarot. With these annotations, di Prima is not only engaging the cosmological principles of the Crowley deck, but mystical traditions on the whole. For instance, di Prima annotates aspects of the ten Sefirot, from the Kabbalah's Tree of Life, another object of her intensive study. Blending the Kabbalah and the Tarot is generally considered part of the twentieth-century Tarot tradition (practiced by di Prima's friend, Mary Greer), yet the body of di Prima's annotations show extensive interest in generating these symbols, writing out these correspondences, and making them vivid across traditions.

In particular, di Prima has created a Kabbalistic workbook, adorned with the cover of Paul Riccius' *Portae Lucis* (1516), known as one of the first texts that elucidated the Tree of Life in the Kabbalistic tradition. Di Prima's workbook contains no fewer than forty-eight drawings of the Tree of Life, in a variety of colors, styles, and with varying annotations that draw together traditions of Tarot and elements. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully explore the Kabbalistic traditions and correspondences that di Prima makes vivid in these pages, they attest to a general theme in her knowledge-building: the syncretic, synergistic way that traditions (especially occult) inform each other and the possibilities of harnessing this as a holistic form of knowledge.

One of the most powerful outcomes of this type of correspondence-based work that appears so readily in di Prima's occult library is her teaching, particularly during the 1980s at the San Francisco Institute of Magical and Healing Arts, an institute she co-founded with her partner, Sheppard Powell that ran from 1983 until 1992 ("Old Father, Old Artificer" 51). In addition to her teaching at New College, SIMHA was a key vector for di Prima to share the syncretic wisdom of the traditions she studied, as an "educational organization presenting a grounded approach to the hermetic tradition," staffed by her and members of the Gold Circle. In spring 1985, di Prima teaches "Structures of Magic," a course that covers the polarities, the four elements, and the numbers one through ten in order to:

> evolve the Tree of Life and the 78 cards of the Tarot. Relationships of the cards to the Tree, correspondences between the Major Arcana and the Hebrew alphabet, etc., will also be explored. Whenever possible we will use both reason (discussion) and imagination (visualization) to approach the material.[49]

[49] Berg Coll Di Prima ZC6 S26 1985 Spring 1985. SF Inst. of Magical + Healing Arts. Classes, Workshops, and Intensives.

Her annotations speak to this same theme—exploring reason and imagination, working across traditions not just to understand the Tree of Life or the Tarot, but to "evolve" it by building from polarities (light and dark) and the four elements. "Evolving" the Tarot and its correspondences was also a preoccupation of her friend, Timothy Leary, whose *The Game of Life*, co-authored with Robert Anton Wilson, was a multi-decade project that explored the correspondences between the Tarot and the periodic table of the elements. This symbolic and connected approach exists in an even greater context; that same semester, in spring 1985, di Prima teaches "Principles of Homeopathy" on "the great "polycrests" or type-remedies," as well as "Psychic Self-Defense" for "tak[ing] power back into our own hands." Her annotations show the interconnectedness of esoteric traditions, highlight the depth of her teaching expertise, and suggest that the greatest application of this knowledge is for it to be used to visualize possibilities for personal transformation.

Index

While a strong impulse to annotate symbols and correspondences pervades many of the manual-like books in di Prima's collection, her books often have indices that she writes herself. In *The Murdered Magicians: The Templars and their Myth* by Peter Partner (Thorsons Publishing Group, The Aquarian Press, Crucible), the back cover states "some real stuff" and then lists a series of page numbers that point to relevant topics. Likewise, Uma Silbey's *The Complete Crystal Guidebook* (U-Read Publications, San Francisco, 1986), is practically indexed by di Prima on the back flyleaf, including notes to purchase white silk, salt, a box, as well as what appear to be notes in preparation for teaching various aspects of crystal use—programming for protection, for healing, focus, and protection—even writing. In fact, books about crystals and precious rocks form a surprising bulk of the collection—with no fewer than twenty volumes on the first shelf alone, including books on

geology, crystal healing, gemstones, precious stones, crystal guidebooks and workbooks, from pocket-size books to coffee-table offerings. Of these, Silbey's is the most annotated—a teaching tool for both di Prima and her students.

In Lewis Spence's *The History of Atlantis* (University Books, di Prima notes 'Orig. publication 1926), di Prima uses the pastedown and the free endpaper to index the book, writing key themes and page numbers across the pages. For this particular text, the index contains "Atlantis in the Far North 34-35," "Egypt 41," "Bullfighting 48 (cf 22)," "Neolithic Culture as coming from Atlantis 78-79," and more, over the span of two pages. In this dimension, di Prima's indexical annotations make good on her conception of these books as a "reference library," meant to be used and explored. Her annotations make these texts that much more useful—for the casual reader searching for specific subtopics, as well as for scholars who wish to understand her interests and expertise.

The index, while it may traditionally have a reputation as a sterile device for navigating reference material, becomes energetic in di Prima's hand. Her indexes are rigorous and focused on the topic, but also subjective because they are *hers*, bespoke. By examining these annotations, we might more fully understand how di Prima digested and made meaning of the texts in her Library, and how this impulse to parse texts, note their themes, and draw connections from this information also informs her other writing.[50] Part of the feature of the index is di Prima's knowledge base is so vast, and projects so expansive, that an index would assist her in navigating her work in new ways. It suggests, in part, that di Prima also navigates her work through particular themes, symbols, and motifs, rather than external markers like titles or page numbers. Likewise, it suggests to us as readers a type of comprehensiveness, a new way to explore or arrange our experience of the poems. Since *Loba* is formatted in the order that the poems were received, why not read all the poems with the

[50] In conversation with Diane di Prima, April 1st, 2018. San Francisco, she mentioned the usefulness of indices for books like *Revolutionary Letters* and *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, so it's easier for her to locate the poems and passages for her own readings.

color red at once, or all the ones with a particular type of stone? Perhaps even more resonant with the Library itself, the importance of indexing for di Prima's annotation and as a possible activity for her poetry and prose works is part of this idea of *reference*. For di Prima, reference is not a genre, but a way of reading and experiencing text: books are meant to be used.

Staying Open: Dictation

By way of provisional conclusion, for the possibilities of this ongoing and evolving occult library, I return to di Prima's poetics. By the 1960s, di Prima describes writing a different type of poem, "with their longer lines and almost deadly certainty," beginning after her "first peyote trip" and the "vast permission" of her composition classes with Jimmy Waring. She recounts:

> now…a powerful voice found its way through me and into the world. The first of many voices that would speak through me, now that I no longer sought to control the poem. (*Recollections* 222)

This type of poetics requires an availability and a vulnerability to the poem that sometimes requires dramatic action, as di Prima recounts of her reception of *Loba*. She was "teaching in a high school in Watsonville," and remembers when:

> I just had to let the other guy take over the class and write it down. And I (had) no notion of what she was talking about and no notion of what the next part and (part) two was about and slowly began to realize they all had this wolf. (Allen Ginsberg Project)

In Jerome and Diane Rothenberg's anthology, *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics* (1983), di Prima frames the moment teaching in Watsonville with a prior experience, also involving teaching in an underserved community. She recounts a two-week stint teaching in Wyoming that left her ill for a month—partially, since as she describes, "there was nothing to eat but steak and liquor," and perhaps mostly, because of the heaviness of experiencing a "situation of people living in total pain" without anyone to blame, and seemingly without recourse (441, 442). Di Prima describes how integrating this information resulted in her dreams shifting from replaying experiences she had had in Wyoming to becoming more deeply symbolic—including a significant dream that involved her and two children attempting to escape from being eaten by a wolf, gladiator-style, for the entertainment of the wealthy—only to have to wolf begin to walk alongside her. She recounts,

> And at some point, I turned around and looked this creature in the eye, and I recognized, in my dream, I recognized or remembered this huge white wolf, beautiful white head, recognized this as a goddess that I'd known in Europe a long long time ago. Never having read about any European wolf-goddesses, I just recognized this as deity. We stood and looked at each other for a long moment. ("The Birth of Loba" 442)

Later, di Prima describes how this dream is the only one that she has directly transcribed into a poem—in Part Four, titled "Dream: The Loba Reveals Herself" (443). And while it would take another year for what di Prima identifies as the first *Loba* poems—while teaching in another emotionally heavy space, "with barbed wire around the playing field, guards all over the place," the dream-genesis of the poem is essential not just from a perspective on technique but also the question of intuition ("The Birth of Loba" 442). Referencing a past life, "a goddess I'd known in

Europe a long long time ago," and experiencing a sense of recognition—not cognition, not analysis, just the experiencing of "look[ing] at each other for a long moment"—di Prima foregrounds the principle that sourcework ("never having read about any European wolf-goddesses") and witnessing are often not chronological or hierarchical experiences, but interwoven.

In the third section of *Loba*, by the time of its publication in Wingbow Press in 1978, two poems are litanies: "Some of the People This Poem is For" consists of two pages of names, including Lenore Kandel, di Prima's daughters, Muriel Rukeyser, Mary Korte, H.D., Mother Mary, and a host of other women writers in the twentieth century (55). A few poems later, another untitled poem consists of a block of text that enumerates multiple names of mother goddess figures across historical era and cultures: Duna, Ishtar, the White Lady, Cerridwen, Diana, Kali, Maat, and Freya (69). The effect of this poetic practice is incantatory; the reader repeats the names of the goddesses and poets in the act of reading that, by virtue of its repetition, becomes devotion. Likewise, poetic effect not only occurs within sound, rhythm, and association, but in the consolidation of often-occulted knowledge—the names of the goddess. This twofold (at the very least) effect requires the reader to calibrate their interpretive style: to lean on research, intuition, or both? Thus, in a work like (but not limited to) *Loba*, the poem invites meaning through multiple layers: firstly, through the intuitive work of reading words and bodies of knowledge not yet familiar to the reader, and secondly, through the investigative work that the poem makes so seductive. Resisting a solely bibliographic or source-based approach even as it calls for rigor, di Prima's work reminds us that a variety of reading practices can create comprehensive meaning in the act of the poem.

Rather than a process of planning, mapping, and execution, di Prima receives poems and does not heavily edit by either rearranging or rewriting. This act of reception appears vividly in the first section of *Loba*, whose poems veer heavily towards images of wolves and Kali, evoking the surrender needed from poet and reader; "If he did not come apart in her hands, he fell / like flint on

her ribs" (Wingbow 1), and "If you do not come apart like bread / in her hands, she falls / like steel on your heart" (Wingbow 26). To "come apart" is a mystical concept at its core: from the medieval era onward, the practice of dissolving the self (to "come apart") in order to reform in perfect union with God ("come a part" of) is fundamental to the experience of conversion. Likewise, the verb 'falling' connotes surrender and penetration at once—"flint on her ribs" and "steel on your heart" suggest sacrifice, in the sharpness and strength of the materials di Prima references. The repetition, and also paradox, of both "falling" and "coming apart" constitute the mystical initiation of both di Prima and reader: an invitation, and perhaps requirement, to surrender to the terms of the poem.

By the end of the first poem, which stretches over the course of pages, it seems that the poetic technique is embedded in the language itself: "does she look / w / her wolf's eyes out of your head?" Di Prima advises we read *Loba* without sources, like the *Cantos*—reading with the intuition of a child, a young reader, who imagines before reaching for the dictionary (or now, search engine). This type of reading creates space for an immersive, and indeed, inhabited experience. The looking with wolf eyes out of a human head might be read as a type of *ars poetica* for the possession aspects of di Prima's visitation by *Loba* as a poetic figure, but also for the necessity of the reader adopting an immersive stance, or being seduced into this stance. We might apply this *praxis* to our understanding of her vast and rhizomatic occult library, with its profusion of themes, annotations, and evidence of a poet in the act of investigation and absorption. By yielding to the terms of intuition, research, writing, "the things to be done," we might inhabit the possibilities of di Prima's vision for her collection.

Provisional Conclusions

Diane di Prima notes that the reception of her poetry has varied, especially in regard to differences in artistic community across geography. She recounts, "when *Loba* was being written, if I read it in New York, people had a million intellectual questions and they didn't understand," while if she "read it in Sonoma, all the young, single moms with their babes would come out of the woods, and they'd hear it and dig it" (Hadbawnik). Within the body of the *Loba* itself, the poem "The Critic Reviews Loba" speaks to the New York-style reception, written in a slew of italicized questions that attempt to gain intellectual control over the nature of the work. The poem begins:

> *Where is the history in this, & how*
> *does geometry of the sacred mountain give strength*
> *to the metaphor*
>
> *wd she have us believe*
> *that passion & shifting flesh enhance*
> *proportion*
>
> *where are the dates, street names*
> *precise equations?*

Here, the figure of the critic is at first concerned with a viable concept of "history"—chronological, perhaps even geographic, but certainly concerned with establishing a concept of poetic authority—"where is the history in this"—almost suggests an absence, a missing core, or a failure on the part of the poet. The speaker goes on to ask formal and mathematical questions—how is metaphor affected

by the “geometry of the sacred mountain,” or how could questions of the body or emotions trump the mathematical perfection of “proportion?” So too, the speaker longs for concrete details—“dates, street names / precise equations”—to anchor the poem in lived experience. Of course, *Loba* will offer no such reassurance. The poem continues with a plea:

Must we accept

that star clouds burst with feeling

Hermes dances

in blood & bone

no longitude given/ it moves

& breathless beauty

of circle and dodecahedron

form the mind's light

cutting lines of Force

thru this quivering

flesh seedpod/

Cosmos

The disdainful—or groveling, for the poor, overwhelmed critic—“must we accept” shows, in part, a realization of the terms of the poem, a rhetorical question that answers itself with the language that follows. For a skeptical critic, the speaker of the poem begins to descend into *Loba*-like language—“breathless beauty,” “dodecahedron / form the mind's light”—and ultimately arrives at a conception of the body as a “flesh seedpod,” immediately aligned and juxtaposed at once by a slash to no less than the “Cosmos,” reeling into the end of the poem without punctuation, equivocation,

or explanation. While the poem initially evokes the beside-the-point type of poetic criticism that seeks to not understand the poem on its own terms, but rather to force it into context with the critic's own consciousness, by the end of the poem the language suggests that the figure of the critic may have experienced a bit of *Loba* possession in the manner of the poet herself. So, if even the critic must too yield to a sense of possession in the experience of the poem, and even if the variety of sources within the text appear to reach ever-outward into new sites of meaning, no reading experience can escape the premise of the poem's composition. We must inhabit the world of the poem on its terms if we are to understand it, and there is no substitute for intuition and imagination in this process.

In a conversation with Diane di Prima in the spring of 2018, we spoke about her library and about *Loba*. Many of my questions focused on the relationship between sources and poetry itself, as I considered her occult library as a resource alongside epic works like the *Cantos* and *Loba*. In this conversation, di Prima reminded me of the power of reading intuitively, focusing on what could be understood in the first moment of reading—reading like a child for the experience itself. She shared that she's been re-reading mostly nineteenth-century classics, and that if she didn't follow her own advice she'd be reading more dictionary than book. Ammiel Alcalay, writing on the *Maximus Poems* in *a little history*, flags a related concept and its stakes for understanding twentieth-century poetry:

> the false assumption…that one needs all kinds of erudition in order to approach something…it's as if there were two strains of American poetry: those deriving from Pound—one needs all kinds of esoteric knowledge in order to even open their books—and those deriving from Williams—their work is vernacular and emotional. These origins and splits are posited so that everyone else becomes derivative or an imitator and can then be erased. (104)

Looking at Alcalay's and di Prima's wisdom side by side, one must examine poetry for the immediate experience it produces, within its historical and material context. Skipping anywhere else first—lineage, the dictionary, erudition—distorts what is happening in the moment itself. This requires a certain unmediated interaction with poetic materials. Time to flip through pages, time to browse titles and books, the physical space to perform these actions. Taking this time is politically imperative to prevent the erasure of difference, too. As Olson tells Dorn in the *Bibliography*, one doesn't have to know everything there is to know, just the tight particulars and context of a few prime things.

Primary sources offer significant recourse in allowing us to experience what feel like unmediated materials, which absorb us with their immediate qualities. Yet, especially in the archive, while sources claim to be primary they are often highly mediated before our arrival. One of the first principles of archival processing, or the act of describing and physically arranging archives for research use, is to "gain intellectual control" over the materials (Pearce-Moses). As I spent a week cataloging di Prima's occult library, sensing viscerally the importance of the books and also the fact that *all of this material was contained in Diane di Prima the poet*, the archival processing instinct to try and "gain control" kicked in. Looking at di Prima's library, I was asking for "*the dates, street names...precise equations.*" Archival processing is a necessary step in custodianship, but so is an initial, unmediated approach.

To combine Alcalay's and di Prima's instructions here—*come as you are, see what's there, hold off on categories*—this is the necessary dance with poets' libraries, given how heavily they sit in their materiality. On the one hand, to find them homes, it is difficult to avoid subjecting them to "the dates, street names, precise equations" of "gaining intellectual control" over their contents—asking the poet, "what is this library for?" "how does this library relate to your poetry?" and any number of

questions that can tell an archival story, but might be wholly artificial in the context of a living, breathing, working library. At times, if we can answer these types of questions, it puts us in a position of strength to advocate for these collections for those who hold institutional sway and funding, and who need those precise street names and dates (so to speak) to advocate for purchase or preservation. It is historically imperative to make plans for the poets' libraries of our recent generation, and this inevitably entails working within current systems to ensure their importance is legible. This may mean placing these libraries within formal institutions, generating new institutions to house them, or reimagining the resources of these libraries' current and future communities. At the other end of the spectrum, this may also mean returning to Jack Clarke's "biblio. vs. library," and creating extensive documentation of these libraries and others' as a means for advocating for their preservation, or preserving them in bibliographic form if other avenues are not possible. For both the Maud/Olson Library and di Prima's occult library, this work remains ongoing.

A Further Note on Libraries

While this dissertation explores the work of Charles Olson and Diane di Prima specifically, its frame of reference extends outward both historically and conceptually as a result of the question of "poets' libraries" as archival and poetic units. In 1986, H. Curtis Wright argued that "the future of librarianship" depends on negotiating the "physical symbol and its symbolic referent," or the book and what it represents (729). Books, as a technology of memory, take on manifold connotations: at times representative of human bodies, cultural institutions, and collective beliefs. And if a single tome generates talismanic energies, curated collections often symbolize cultural inheritance, or civilization itself.

By the twentieth century, libraries as public institutions in the United States were built with dramatic architecture, operated with increasingly complex labor infrastructures, and made promises

to provide the political and humanistic good of knowledge for all. Even in collections comprised of materials that are considered rare or special, this democratic symbolism was at the fore. For instance, the dedication of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library in 1940, included thousands of volumes of some of the rarest collector items within the field of literature at the turn of the century. Yet the tone of the speeches that day emphasized the "public" aspect of the library and the political relationship between literature, war, and knowledge in American culture. Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia's (1940) speech to commemorate the event attests:

> It will be perhaps a century before Europe will be able to catch up and rebuild both spiritually and materially all the destruction and the damage wrought during the past year. And therefore, extension of libraries, the increase in capacity of our institutions of higher education…is in keeping with this added responsibility which the mistakes of a few individuals in Europe have thrust upon us. I think we are capable of carrying on the torch of enlightenment.[51]

LaGuardia's comments illustrate a number of characteristic conceptions of the role of libraries around the turn of the twentieth-century. Notwithstanding his blaming of "a few individuals in Europe" for the humanitarian crisis of the second World War, LaGuardia's comments reinforce the idea that both spiritual and material growth—in terms of "carrying the torch of enlightenment"—is directly obtainable through both libraries and education. For this reason, twentieth-century libraries in America suggest special symbolic value in their ties to rapidly expanding wealth under industrial

[51] Manuscript box, Berg. "Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection in Memory of Henry W. Berg: Addresses Made at the Formal Presentation" (October 11, 1940). New York: The New York Public Library.

capitalism (as exemplified by the system of Carnegie libraries), as well as emerging ideas about democratic knowledge and education. Thus, the idea of the book as a symbolic referent, with distinct material conditions for its access and preservation, is also deeply tied to this type of intellectual idealism and even, concept of freedom through books.

Yet, as a result of their close ties to political ideology, as well as their ability to symbolize both political sovereignty and intellectual freedom, libraries are frequent targets of intentional destruction. In *Libricide* (2003), Rebecca Knuth discusses "large-scale, regime-sanctioned" destruction of libraries as "an identifiable secondary pattern or sub-phenomena occurring within the framework of genocide and ethnocide" (viii). By discussing these "libricides" as sanctioned by groups ranging from the Nazis to the Serbs in Bosnia, Chinese Communists in Tibet, and other global instances, Knuth notes that destruction of libraries often symbolizes the destruction of progress, civilization, or cultural heritage (3). The stakes of the destruction of cultural records through libricide is perhaps our best evidence of their symbolic and political capacities: to preserve, in material form, the cultural record. The destruction of books, argues Fernando Báez (2004), violates fundamental human rights in the process: "the right to dignity, the right to a complete written memory for individuals and nations, the right to identity, and the right to information" (16).

What gets preserved or destroyed is always a political act, and neglect, too, is political. Gabrielle Dean (2017) addresses the "Other John Updike Archive," curated from John Updike's garbage by Paul Moran, and contrasts the high value assigned to the Moran archive alongside the precariously-housed and understaffed Mayme A. Clayton Museum in Culver City, California, a collection with over 2 million items that rivals the resources of New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (1). Dean draws attention to an archival marketplace that is more likely to value certain authors' trash—and subsequently make trash of genuine historical treasure—based on the powerful canonical and institutional associations of that

author. This type of neglect makes it all too easy for other forces to intervene: faulty plumbing, humid conditions, mice, insects, bookworms, library theft, sunlight—even the acidity of the pages themselves.

Yet Knuth's (2003) work illustrates that the conceptual possibilities of libraries are inextricable from their symbolic capacity to represent human culture and its accumulated knowledge. Her project concludes that "as long as it holds any books at all, a library represents the whole of human knowledge, and with that immeasurably precious legacy, the possibility for progress and human transcendence" (252). Thus, if *any* library of any volume may be taken as metonym for human knowledge itself, with distinct political implications, the question of *whose* library becomes particularly important. The stakes of this not only address Charles Olson and Diane di Prima's libraries, but also have global ramifications when placed in context. In *a little history*, Alcalay cites Lebanese video artist and writer Jalal Toufic's observation that "the seemingly unending proliferation of new art museums and libraries in the West, along with the cataloging and inventorying of books and objects…has been occurring at the same time "Afghans, Bosnians, Iraqis, etc. have been divested of much of their artistic tradition, not only through material destruction, but also through immaterial withdrawal" (25). Ensuring that we can go "back to the books" as a conceptual unit, knowing just how precarious this is, acts as an insurance that the structures of knowledge that these poets built does not get dismantled by institutional or critical forces. It is important that the evidence will be preserved for us to reanimate when the narrative is inevitably distorted.

A note on methodology, here: during my first encounter with Diane di Prima's library, I stood with Sheppard Powell in front of the shelves as we spoke for hours, vibrating with the energy of the books. He was generously sharing insights from his early years as a student of healing—a type of sharing he has formally done as one of the founding teachers of San Francisco Institute of

Magical and Healing Arts with di Prima. Powell said that a critical part of his training was learning how to not heal with his *personal* energy. You've got limited resources to give with just your own power, he told me, but your energy can be almost infinite when you're channeling something greater. This powerful wisdom has stayed with me, in part because of the way it corroborates the very methods of *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative*, a publishing collective that has funded my research on di Prima every step of the way, and fosters an editorial model of graduate students working directly with poets and estates. At *Lost & Found*, we learn to follow the people, listen to the documents, and tell stories on the terms of the poets themselves—watching our preconceived notions of genre, theoretical approaches, or even historical chronology shatter in the process. Scholarship, in this paradigm, is an act of service to the poets who made the history we write about. An act of service that those very poets have done for their community; I think of di Prima typing up Olson's poems for *The Floating Bear*, her attentiveness to their layout and line. Channeling something greater than herself with each issue she mimeographed.

The act of collecting a library after World War Two is both archivally and politically immense, and with resources like the Maud/Olson Library and Diane di Prima's occult library, we can see the traces of this process. Our ability to "read" these libraries, after Brooks Adams' formulation to stretch beyond the idea of the book as the fundamental unit of knowledge, or di Prima's own evocation of alchemical elements as an embodiment of matter's unity, as opposed to particles, depends on negotiating the critical, and indeed emotional impulses that Diane di Prima describes in "The Critic Reviews Loba": asking precise questions, and eventually succumbing to the dance of participating on the terms of the experience itself. In the stacks of the Maud/Olson Library, on the shelves of Diane di Prima's library, in the storehouse of knowledge in Olson and di Prima's poetry, we find the tools we need to not only more fully understand the occulted histories that shape us, and shaped postwar American poetry, but to encounter ourselves anew. To quote di

Prima: "we have the right to make the universe we dream." In the stacks of her library, profuse with the books, are the tools to make this possible.

Archival Materials Consulted

Libraries

The Maud/Olson Library. Gloucester, Massachusetts

Diane di Prima's Occult Library. San Francisco, California.

Archives + Special Collections

City Lights Books Records. The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Diggers Archive. "Early Printed Sheets."< http://www.diggers.org/digger_sheets.htm>

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The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Including "Muriel Rukeyser Collection of Papers," counterculture manuscript and print materials, Berg Uncatalogued Manuscripts.

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