

“BLESSED ARE THE PURE OF HEART”

VARIATIONS ON MAGICAL REALISM IN THE BEAT GENERATION:  
PATHWAYS TO CRITIQUE AND RESISTANCE

BY

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## Abstract

This dissertation explores literary depictions of characters experiencing self discovery as they are presented by three of the writers of the Beat Generation: Jack Kerouac, Elise Cowen, and Diane di Prima. Each of the texts—Dr. Sax, Loba, and Cowen’s poetry— demonstrates how disempowered or oppressed characters evolve, learn to define themselves, and discover a truer sense of self during times of war, struggle, conflict or difficulty. The types of oppression the protagonists and speakers face in these texts is wide-ranging and diverse, but magical realism, and variations on the literary themes presented in magical realism, becomes for these writers a weapon their characters employ for critique and for self preservation against the existing social order. Magical elements allow these characters to reflect their realities and—at best—resist those realities. Pan’s Labyrinth is presented here as a model for these specific themes –magic as a tool that can empower the disempowered—and as a lens through which the other texts are read and understood.

For Michel de Benedictis, the outstanding teacher who introduced me to these “crazy  
Beatniks.” My life has never been the same.

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## I. Introduction

*Y se dice que la princesa descendió al reino de su padre—  
Y que ahí reino con justicia y bondad por muchos siglos. Que fue amada por sus súbditos....  
Y que dejó detrás de sí, pequeñas huellas de su paso por el mundo.  
Visibles solo para aquel que sepa dónde mirar...<sup>1</sup>*



There comes a time in every mature person's life when s/he transitions from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to maturity. For most, this period is adolescence, a period of physical, emotional and intellectual growth. This transition may be private and personal, or it may be the cause for ritual or religious celebration. This growth may occur early for some, while others may not learn who they are or

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<sup>1</sup> And it is said that the Princess went back to her father's kingdom—  
And that she reigned with justice and a kind heart for many centuries. And that she was loved by all her subjects...  
And, like most of us, she left behind small traces of her time on earth. Visible only to those who know where to look...

experience true selfhood and maturity until they are well into adulthood. Others never experience it at all. However, the discovery of self is a time defined by the struggles between personal needs, desires and ambitions, and the existing, often strict and unbending, social order. This formative period of self discovery and maturation is when these struggles are most pronounced, the time that people often decide who they are and who they want to be: when they determine what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, what is right and what is wrong, questioning the social order to that end.

This dissertation explores three literary representations of “adolescents,” people going through emotional growth and personal discovery, as these discoveries are presented by three of the writers of the Beat Generation: Jack Kerouac, Elise Cowen, and Diane di Prima. Each of the texts represented here explores issues of subjugation and tyranny, as they each involve characters who are coming of age and learning to define themselves in relation to the world around them in times of conflict, struggle, and strife. The battle for survival, both literally and a more figurative survival of the self, becomes a way of waging war, a subversive fight against a dominant reality. The texts I have chosen to examine showcase protagonists who are unhappy with existing social norms and refuse to eventually conform to those norms, to what Gregory Corso calls a “pleasant prison dream” (64). Traditionally, social barriers would render these characters powerless to fight due to age, social status, and/or gender, but they each have the mental, individual, and artistic integrity and strength to use the tools they have at their disposal.

The types of oppressions the protagonists and speakers fight in each text is varied and nuanced<sup>2</sup>, but regardless of the specific type of oppression, magic becomes a method of enduring these hardships and of reflecting or critiquing harsh realities, Magic is a concept that is difficult to define since it is something that is often seen as understood, but rarely articulated. Quite simply magic is related to the marvelous, paranormal, and/or supernatural. Magical things and beings go against concepts and constructions of science and nature, and magic is often at odds with logic and religion. This dissertation explores the ways unreal and magical elements interact with the realities in which these protagonists exist. Due to age, place, and social standing, they may not be able to physically strike out against those who would imprison them, but they can strike out with their minds and hearts. They all struggle with issues of personal identity while they fight with forces that would try to define who they are according to the laws of the universe and the realities that surround them. Magic, specifically the varying types of magical realism these writers employ, allows these characters to participate in magical and grotesque worlds that can subvert the dominant social order or critique it by projecting a distorted reflection of that reality.

THE ONLY WAR THAT MATTERS IS THE WAR AGAINST

THE IMAGINATION

ALL OTHER WARS ARE SUBSUMED IN IT

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<sup>2</sup> The types of oppression the Beat Generation writers specifically combat in their writing—McCarthyism, censorship, consumerism, atomic bombs, etc. — is elaborated on further in Chapter 2.

There is no way out of the spiritual battle

There is no way you can avoid taking sides (di Prima, Pieces of a Song  
160, 47-51)

Bold letters tell the reader to wake up, to pay attention. This battle is happening and everyone is a part of it. There's no way out of it. Diane di Prima, writer of these words, is widely known as *the* female Beat writer. While most other women of the Beat Generation published their poems and memoirs years after their time with Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs (if their writing was even published in their lifetimes), di Prima was a major player in the Beat revolution as it was happening. The Beat writers saw themselves as challenging social dictates of normative society, thereby taking the struggle to find and define oneself that was described earlier far beyond the developmental years.

There is no way you can *not* have a poetics

No matter what you do: plumber, baker, teacher (52-3)

Di Prima's insistence that we all have a poetics is quite striking, as is the insistence that the way we choose to express our own poetics, our ability to use our imaginations to the fullest, is always under attack. The Beat Generation was very democratic in their views on poetry and poetics. Poetry was the voice of the people, not just the voice of the educated or the elite. We all "have a poetics" (52) and we all take sides in this "war against the imagination," either through action or through inaction (47-8). Poetics means more here than the simple study of poetry and prosody. It is the way one sees the world and interacts with it, a poem of the self,

made of rhyme and reason. The war, di Prima says, is a “war for the human imagination and no one can fight it but you / & no one can fight it for you” (73-4). How people choose to fight, how they live out their lives in the face of adversity and turmoil, determines their poetics, determines their character. It is important that the Beats saw poetry and literature as appealing to the common reader, as speaking for the common man. The democratic nature of the Beat Generation, the belief that we all have a voice and we all have a poetics, is reflected in magical realism, as well. Magical realism is a mode of expression that challenges the status quo and gives a voice to those outside of privileged centers.

The texts explored here are Jack Kerouac’s Dr. Sax (1959), several untitled (and mostly unpublished) poems by Elise Cowen (1933-1962), and Diane Di Prima’s Loba (1973). Dr. Sax is a part of Jack Kerouac’s Dulouz legend. Kerouac envisioned his novels in a series that would serve to mythologize his life. His alter ego in these books would be Jack Dulouz.<sup>3</sup> In Dr. Sax, Jacky Dulouz grows from innocence to maturity, learning about life, death, and the world around him. The novel blends magical and mystical forces of good and evil with the mundane world of working-class life in Lowell, Massachusetts. Elise Cowen, herself a mythical Beat figure, wrote many poems that draw upon contrasting grotesque images with mundane realities to tell a serious story of pain, death, and what it means to grow up queer and female in a heteronormative society. Loba is Diane di Prima’s long visionary poem about forms of female experience, from birth through death. Di Prima challenges

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<sup>3</sup> There are books in his life story that do not have Dulouz as the hero, but he hoped to go back and change this when all the books in this series were written.

patriarchy, specifically the predominantly male-centered world of western literature and religion, by borrowing from many mythologies and using magick, or the willful manipulation of the universe, in creating her own myth of the wolf goddess.

I define magical realism as a genre in literature, film, and art where the magical or “unreal” appear in realistic settings and circumstances where these elements are treated as though they are commonplace. The magic is never questioned or explained, it merely *is*. Often the magic is not seen by everyone; it is only visible to those with the eyes to see it. It is not fantasy<sup>4</sup> and it isn’t just magic, but it’s about the interactions and intersections between the magical and the “real.” The inclusion of the “real” within magical realism is very important since the “magic” in the texts I have chosen is used as a way of defying convention, defying reality.

The texts explored here are texts where the protagonists see things that others do not see, texts that seamlessly blend the unreal and the commonplace. In these works, magic helps these characters negotiate their difficult realities or resist oppressive forces within their realities. These otherwise powerless characters hold power in their ability to perceive what others do not. The magical elements in their worlds don’t always have power to change negative or difficult realities, but the fact that these characters can recognize the existence of magical and grotesque elements allows them to negotiate their realities accordingly. For example, in Kerouac’s Dr. Sax, Sax may not have the power to actively change Jacky’s reality, but Jacky’s ability to see Sax sets him apart from others in his reality. His ability to recognize

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<sup>4</sup> Fantasy fiction, like Lord of the Rings and The Chronicles of Narnia, create worlds that are separate and distinct from the real world. The fantastic does not exist in our world; the magical does.

magical elements within his world also allows him to see the power magic can ultimately have to make real change, as magical forces ultimately save his reality. This dissertation focuses on not just magical realism, but on two other variations on magic as a subversive tool. The grotesque is the darker side of magical realism that focuses on the collision of opposing forces or images in allowing characters to reflect dark and gruesome aspects of the “real” world, and magick is the willful manipulation of magical elements that exist within reality.

The type of magic that is used in each text has very particular and explicit ties to magical realism as a subversive mode of expression. Even the two variations— the grotesque and magick—both meet very specific characteristics of magical realism<sup>5</sup>. In “The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival,” Mark S. Morrison says that magick and the occult have a very important function in the modern world and in modern letters. Many equate the modern age with inevitable secularization, a “phenomenon of the intellectualization and rationalization of modern life. Modernity emptied the world of its magical forces and mysteries” (3). Morrison argues that “the occult” was able to provide a solution to the disenchantment that surrounded modernity, “offering a kind of re-enchantment of the modern world” (3). This isn’t to say that the types of magic explored in this dissertation are all tied to the occult (though magick, the subject of chapter 4, certainly is), but rather that magic, and specifically magical realism, is and can be subversive in its nature. All of these variations on magical realist themes still reflect how magic combats modern disenchantment. Magic goes

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<sup>5</sup> These characteristics are listed on page 9.

against logic, especially when it exists within reality. It goes against rational thought and reason. It goes against secular laws and dictates. In a rational and unimaginative world, the imagination is truly a powerful tool<sup>6</sup>.

There is much discussion and controversy surrounding what magical realism actually is. It has never been a movement, like the Beat Generation or the Lost Generation, in that no cohesive artists' groups were ever formed and no specific ideologies, ideals, and theories were ever put forth by such a group in defining it. Thus, there is no real "definition" for magical realism as a mode of expression. In its most basic sense, magical realism is a literary and artistic mode of expression where magical elements are present within everyday realities, but treated as though they are normal and commonplace. The term magical realism is purposefully paradoxical. As Morrison pointed out earlier, reality and magic are opposing forces. One is run by logic and one runs contrary to logic. Contradictions stand face to face; opposites walk arm in arm. Clearly in a world ruled by reason and order, then, magic can be a tool for resistance and critique used by protagonists in response to hegemonic forces. Wendy Faris lays out several characteristics of magical realism in her article "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction." This list helps us identify what constitutes a magical realist text, regardless of whether the authors themselves intended to write magical realist fiction or poetry. There is, after all, no

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<sup>6</sup> Though the imagination is separate and different from magic, in the "war against the imagination" that di Prima describes in "Rant," having an active imagination can and does allow people to see the magic that exists in their worlds.

such thing as a magical realist writer—since magical realism is a mode of expression, not a literary movement— there are only magical realist texts:

1. “The text contains an ‘irreducible element’ of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them. In the terms of the text, magical things “really” do happen” (167). The real as we know it may also be made to seem amazing or even ridiculous whereas the unreal is made to seem ordinary or commonplace.
2. The author uses extensive and specific details in describing magical events in order to ground them in reality (169).
3. Readers may be torn between two contradictory understandings of the same event, thus unsettling their understanding of reality as it is presented in the text (171).
4. Readers “experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds” (172). Magical realism often exists at the intersection of two competing worlds, at an imaginary point between these worlds where it is possible for the two worlds to inform each other.
5. Magical realism forces the reader to question traditional ideas about time, space, and identity. (173)

There are also several secondary characteristics that are helpful in “building magical realist rooms in the post modern house of fiction” (175). Below are a few of these characteristics:

1. Magical elements in the text are largely recounted in a matter-of-fact way, “accepted – presumably—as a child would accept them, without undue questioning or reflection” (177). The fact that Jacky simply accepts the existence of such magical beings as Sax and Count Condu in Dr. Sax is an example of this.
2. Magical realist texts often take a position that is anti-bureaucratic, using magic to subvert the established social order (179). Much of my argument has to do with the way these writers use magical realism as a tool against oppressive societal norms. Cowen, for example, uses the grotesque as a form of protest against existing social structures.
3. Often times, magical realist texts draw on early mythologies, ancient religions, and local traditions in creating the *magic* within the text (182). Di Prima draws on many different mythologies and religions in Loba, creating the magick in her text.

The texts I explore in this dissertation have, in all probability, admittedly slid into the category of magical realism—and its variations—unintentionally. There is no evidence to suggest that Cowen and Kerouac even knew the term, much less that they employed it deliberately. But the magic and the grotesque in their stories and poems are never questioned or explained. So even though these writers would not have categorized themselves as magical realist writers, upon reflection of their works, these writers undeniably utilized magical realism and magical realist characteristics in the creation of their fictional and poetic worlds. Dr. Sax is a straight-forward, Beat

Generation magical-realist novel. There are irreducible elements of magic present in the novel which are never explained or accounted for. The magic simply exists within Jacky's universe. The magic is very real and not just a figment of a child's imagination. The magic informs Jacky's reality and his reality also informs the magic. The variations on magical realism are present in the other two texts explored in this dissertation. Elise Cowen's poetry uses the grotesque to inform her reality and di Prima uses magick in Loba as her defiant tool in the battle against the imagination.

My analysis of Dr. Sax focuses on magic as a destabilizing force within the "real" world. In Dr. Sax, Jacky, our protagonist grows up in working class Lowell, Massachusetts. He sees that the examples of adulthood all around him are filled with lies and deceit, death and sadness, and he resists this world with all his might. Magical realism makes its way into this text since magic is Jacky's weapon in his personal battle. One question logically emerges when one takes magical realism, a mode of expression largely considered a Latino/ Latin-American literary movement, and applies said movement to the Beats, especially Jack Kerouac, a writer who has come to represent a decidedly North American literary and artistic movement: How does one address the potential dangers of appropriation and colonization inherent in this analysis? Certainly the Beat Generation has been the subject of such questioning before. Kerouac in particular has been accused of cultural appropriation on several occasions and this author has herself noted some problematic representations of the racialized other in Kerouac's fiction. Kerouac was a notorious "romantic racialist,"

possessing a well-intentioned but flawed and paternalistic view of racial difference.<sup>7</sup> However, it should be noted that magical realism is not inherently Latino or Latin-American and to claim such is to racialize the category of magical realism in problematic ways. Latino and Latin-American fiction is seen as being synonymous with magical realism in some circles, but this conflating of categories is simply wrong.

To begin with, the term “magical realism” originated in Germany in the 1920s. In 1925, Franz Roh used the term magical realism for the first time, describing a new trend in German painting which both returned to realism while combining it with expressionism’s more abstract style (Faris 15). Angel Flores likes to denote 1935 as the point when Latin American magical realism took off, largely due to Jorge Luis Borges’s publication of *Historia universal de la infamia*; for most critics, though, magical realism really started to be recognized as a primarily Latino and Latin-American mode of expression in the 1950s and 1960s, the period in literature known in some circles as the “Latin American Boom,” and this particular generalization has never really gone away. In Alejo Carpentier’s essay “On the Marvelous Real in America” (1949), he described magical realism (or the marvelous real, as he called it then) as an amplification of reality, which he felt was an innate part of Latin American culture. Later in “Baroque and the Marvelous Real” (1975), he said that magical realism “is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American. Here the strange is commonplace, and always was commonplace”

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<sup>7</sup> I delve more deeply into Kerouac’s particular brand of romantic racialism in Chapter 1.

(104). Carpentier's influential essays on the subject of magical realism, paired with the "Latin American Boom" and the iconic magical realist texts like One Hundred Years of Solitude that emerged from it, make connections between magical realism and Latin American/ Latino culture very strong and noticeable. However, despite these historical associations between magical realism and Latino/ Latin American culture, magical realism has also been applied to the works of such diverse writers as Salman Rushdie, and Toni Morrison, and has even been retroactively applied to the works of writers like William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, Edgar Allen Poe, and even as far back as Cervantes<sup>8</sup>. Magical realism has to do with the ways a particular text undermines and plays with concepts of reality, not with cultural or historical context or geographical setting.

One variation on magical realist themes is the grotesque in literature and poetry. The grotesque functions metaphorically as the other side of the magical realist coin. As Scott Simpkins tells it, magical realism emphasizes "common elements of reality, elements that are often present but have become virtually invisible because of their familiarity. And through a process of supplemental illusions, these textual strategies seem to produce a more realistic text" (150). The grotesque does this too, but it focuses on the dark side of reality. Whereas magical realism often infuses reality with magic, reflecting a type of reality that should be or that can be, or reflecting elements of the marvelous in the mundane, the grotesque reflects the

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<sup>8</sup> Angel Flores applies this label to Kafka, Poe and Cervantes in "Magical Realism in Spanish America" (110-112). Lois Parkinson Zamora applies this label to Poe and Faulkner in "Magical Romance / Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction" (509-515).

grossness and darkness that is evident in human nature and human interaction.

Gabriel García Márquez, for example, has called war the most perfect example of the grotesque in modern culture, because war, in its most basic and universal definition, “demands in a moment that one kill and in the next that one be killed” (Danow 62).

This is absurd *and* grotesque. In the twentieth century, the grotesque is primarily defined through its presentation of a violent clash of opposites. By juxtaposing, and opposing dark and light, life and death, writers can illuminate the dark side of human nature and the human condition, just as magical realism can illustrate the marvelous, or at least the potential for the marvelous that exists in reality. In The Grotesque (1972), Philip Thomson says:

It has always been generally agreed that the grotesque is extravagant, that it has a marked element of exaggeration, of extremeness, about it. [...] if ‘fantastic’ means simply a pronounced divergence from the normal and natural then the grotesque is undoubtedly fantastic. But if, as we surely must, we insist that the criterion be whether the material is presented in a fantastic, or realistic way, then we are more likely to conclude that, far from possessing an affinity with the fantastic, it is precisely the conviction that the grotesque world, however strange, is yet our world, real and immediate, which makes the grotesque so powerful. (23)

The grotesque, then, like more traditional forms of magical realism, illustrates aspects of reality that are often ignored. Through the collision of opposing images and

through ludicrous, macabre, and grotesque images, Cowen reflects the falseness of reality, the absurdity of our customs and traditions, the cruelty of our everyday behaviors and rituals.

Finally, Di Prima's use of magick in Loba demonstrates another variation on magical realist themes. The "K" at the end of the word differentiates magick from other types of magic, which some would argue can be synonymous with make-believe—magic lamps and wishing stars. Magick is when someone or something causes miracles to occur by willfully manipulating the laws of the universe. Magick has been used to describe paranormal phenomena or occult traditions, but is in its most basic sense a description of what happens when amazing elements are found and explored within the mundane, which is also how one might describe magical realism. Magick in Loba is a tool used against the male-centeredness of patriarchal cultures. Magickal elements in the poem reflect a vision of female-centeredness, retelling familiar myths and folklore from a decidedly female perspective. Both in its use of ancient myths, stories, and folklore and its use of the unreal as a means of subverting the "real" world, the magick in Loba mirrors magical realism. But whereas magical realism is about the existence of magic within reality, magick does not merely exist; it is willfully and purposely created.

One of the more controversial aspects of this dissertation is perhaps the fact that two of its chapters explore magical realism in poetry. When it comes to poetry, one might question how magical realism, even as it relates to the grotesque and to magick, is possible in a genre that is by definition not grounded in narrative and

reality. Magical realism is so often associated with prose rather than poetry because the “realism” in magical realism is just as important as the magic. When approaching poetry, one often expects metaphor and symbolism; one expects reality to be subverted. The difference between magical realist poetry and other types of poetry that rely on symbolism and metaphor, however, is the fact that magical realist poetry *does* ground the reader in reality before using magical elements to subvert that reality.

Margin, the online literary magazine dedicated to exploring modern magical realism, notes that the poetic form has not historically been at the center of the ongoing discussion of magical realism, but “When poet Walt Whitman said, ‘Who speaks of miracles? I know of nothing but miracles . . . ,’ he might have been referring to this propensity of poets to engage the ordinary with the magical” (Margin). Kelli Russell Agodon says of the concept of magical realist poetry: “I think the best Magical Realism poems take an idea or image and bring it that one step further, suspending a reader's disbelief—staying in our world, but stretching the poem into another dimension” (Margin). It is the suspension of disbelief, the grounding in this world while stretching into others, that takes a poem from fantasy, surreality, or symbolism into magical realism. Further, even magical realist prose has been known to be metaphorical or symbolic, so the presence of metaphor or symbolism in poetry doesn't exclude it from the realm of magical realism. Faris mentions the examples of Patrick Suskind's Perfume (1976) and Gabriel García Márquez's “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” (1968). Grenouille's perfuming abilities and the scents he creates are magical, “but the mass hysteria that they engender, tearing him literally

limb from limb and devouring him at the end of the novel, if exaggerated, is real, and all too familiar as an analogue for the power of charismatic leaders and the malleability of crowds” (13). Magic serves as political allegory in Márquez’s short story as Pelayo and Elisenda exploit and abuse the old man as capitalist employers exploit and abuse their workers (14). Clearly, then, metaphor and magic can coexist, as can poetry and magical realism. For poetry to be magical realist, it needs to extend beyond metaphor. Along these lines, it should be noted that many of Cowen’s poems function on a strictly metaphorical level, which complicates them as magical realist poems. However, even when they don’t work as strictly magical realist poems, the poems I have chosen always work as grotesque poems. Disparate and opposing images clash and come together and provide a dark and distorted vision of harsh realities. They ground the reader in reality before disrupting that reality with grotesque and distorted reflections of the absurdities of the real world.

The characters in these novels, films, and poems are all at stages in their lives where they are only just discovering who they are, what they believe, and who they want to be. They might not all be technically and biologically “coming of age” in these texts, but they are all in the process of coming to know who they are and where they stand. They are defining themselves in relation to the world—or worlds—around them. They are all characters who develop a distinct sense of self amidst battles, both physical and spiritual. The protagonists and speakers in each of these texts have an acute awareness of magical and grotesque elements that seamlessly blend into their “real” worlds. Magic is a powerful tool for these characters, and the

magic often takes place in scenes of cultural crisis or political unrest. Though not all the texts I use are strictly examples of magical realism, they are all offshoots of magical realism, different sides of the same magical realist coin.

One characteristic of magical realism that applies to each of these texts is the way magic is used to challenge the existing social order, suggesting a resemblance to post-colonial writing in that it uses the “master’s” discourse to undermine the “master’s” social frameworks and ideologies. As Wendy Faris says in “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction,” “Many of these texts take a position that is anti bureaucratic, and so they often use their magic against the established social order” (179). In this dissertation, I examine the ways in which magical elements apply not only to large social and political issues, but also to personal crises and identity politics. Each of these characters learns to deal with outside “grown up” forces that would try to “colonize” their individuality, their personal growth, and their identities. There may be cultural crisis and political unrest in these texts—and often there is— but personal unrest is my focus here. These characters personify the old feminist rallying cry that the personal is political. Indeed, the personal *is* political in all of these texts. In the battles against the imagination, these characters use magic, magick, and the grotesque, the things which others may not see in their realities, to reflect their realities or to fight the master’s dictates that they “grow up” and on some level “sell out.”

If one looks at what Luis Leal argues is the function of magical realism, one can see the basic premise of my argument regarding the function of magical elements

in these Beat Generation texts: “In magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts” (121). This is very in tune with the Beat sensibility. As trite as it may sound, the Beat writers really were searching for something real in a world that had become, in their minds, increasingly false. In the Beat Generation texts examined here, where our protagonists and speakers come of age, magical elements are employed as tools for critique and resistance. In a cold, harsh world, a world that does not believe in the power of magic, magic is a tool for protest and rebellion, and it is recognized and employed by the protagonists in these novels and poems to fight off and critique hegemonic forces.

Stephen Hart asks: does the “fantasy in a magical realist novel indicate[s] the hallucinations of an artist who is in the process of retreating from the world around him, or does it embody the desire for a more just political world?” (101). The texts I have chosen illustrate both ends. Each text portrays a magical response to di Prima’s “war against the imagination.” In other words, magical realism and its variations are each writer’s chosen response to the harsh realities and battles that surround their speakers and protagonists, the battles that try to push the protagonists and speakers from innocence to adulthood, and all that means in the battle against the imagination. As the character Alison says in The Breakfast Club<sup>9</sup> (1985): “when you grow up, your heart dies.” The characters and speakers in question fight to keep their young hearts alive and they use magical elements within their realities to that end. The

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<sup>9</sup> The Breakfast Club is a cinematic example of adolescents negotiating their places within the established social order.

writers may use variations on traditional magical realist characteristics, but the essence and spirit of magical realism and its functions in literature are still present in these texts. Whether these writers make use of the grotesque as the darker side of magical realism or magick as the willful manipulation of “reality,” magical elements interact seamlessly with the real world. The magical and the grotesque are treated as though they are commonplace and ordinary, but they surely exist and they affect the nature of reality.

I selected one film as my model for the dissident use of magic and magical elements that I explore in these Beat Generation texts in later chapters. I have chosen the Mexican film written and directed by Guillermo del Toro, Pan's Labyrinth. Pan's Labyrinth is the magical realist lens through which I read these Beat Generation texts and is the perfect model because it is an example of magical realism and it is a coming-of-age story. Ofelia, our protagonist, is learning about herself, the adult world that surrounds her, and her place in it, throughout the course of the film. Del Toro had initially envisioned a younger actress playing the part of Ofelia. In an interview with Patricia Chui of MovieFone, he said the part was originally written for an eight or nine-year-old, so when Ivana Baquero walked in, he immediately thought she was too old. He had envisioned a character that would call to mind the legendary Spanish child actress Ana Torrent, whose films The Spirit of the Beehive (1973) and Cría Cuervos (1976) both highly influenced del Toro as a filmmaker. When they cast Baquero, del Toro rewrote the screenplay for her, thus reworking the film from simply being the story of a young child navigating her journey in an adult world to

the story of an adolescent, being told she must grow up in and assimilate to this adult world. The magical elements in the film guide Ofelia on her journey from innocence to maturity. Not only does the magical inform the real in this film and vice-versa, but in Ofelia's hands, the magic is a rebellious tool meant to subvert the status quo. In many ways, this film's backdrop is also a model for battles against the imagination.

Ofelia is a little girl coming of age five years after the end of the Spanish Civil War. Like Jacky in Dr. Sax, she resists growing up and all that growing up implies. Although she is told by her mother and stepfather to stop reading fairy tales and to stop being such a child, she does not want to "grow up" and stop believing in magic. She has a deep faith and belief that like the heroes in her stories, she is a part of something larger. The magic within her bleak reality gives her hope and strength while it still frightens and threatens her. As is true of magical realism, the magic in Ofelia's world is not escapist. Ofelia's magical world smacks of menace and danger as it interacts with her reality, and that reality is also quite bleak. This is much like the magic in Dr. Sax, which threatens to destroy the world as we know it, a world which, at least from Jacky's perspective, is also filled with death and darkness.

The magic in Ofelia's world also reflects the sort of grotesque magic Cowen writes about in her poetry. Ofelia's father is dead and her stepfather is a deplorable and murderous human being. She lives in Spain under Franco's fascism. Violence and bloodshed, as well as overall contempt, surround her. But her magical world is also filled with monsters and elements of the grotesque. It isn't an escape; it's a different reality, one that reflects her circumstances in life. When she sees "the pale man," his

presence is meant to reflect her home in reality and a scene where her stepfather, a different kind of monster, sits at the head of a similarly long and intimidating dining room table. The grotesque monster is a reflection of her real stepfather. The grotesque elements in magical realism often reflect the dark and disturbing realities of our own worlds. But through all the difficulty and turmoil in her life, Ofelia believes in something larger than her surroundings. She knows that her destiny is bigger than those around her would have her believe.

In the end, Ofelia is able to envision her reality and bring it to fruition, and this willful manipulation of her reality reflects the magick in Loba. She does not survive in this world, but she is embraced as a princess in her father's kingdom. She is literally rewarded with treasures in heaven, or in Ofelia's case, the underground realm of her father's kingdom. The very first image in the film is the image of blood returning into this dying girl's body. It is an image that not only speaks to hope and possibility, but also, as del Toro said in his director's commentary, signals to the reader that "this movie is not about a girl dying, but about a girl giving birth to herself, the way she wanted to be." Part 9 of Loba opens with a similar statement:

*There is a way in which  
I am a double of myself  
my own mirror image  
or that I give birth to myself  
& am simultaneously  
mother and daughter*

*like the double spiral (161)*

Ofelia has to give birth to herself in Pan's Labyrinth because her own mother had given up and lost herself long ago. In her earthly life, Ofelia loves reading fairy tales despite her mother and wicked stepfather's<sup>10</sup> insistence that she is too old to be wasting time with such foolishness. Del Toro has said that the moment we put away our toys and our fairytales is the moment we put away our souls and "grow up." This resistance to adulthood and assimilation is a common theme in his films, and is one of the driving themes that this dissertation explores. Further, the adult insistence in this film that fairy tales are meant to be put aside and discarded once one reaches adulthood shows a lack of imagination. Clarissa Pinkola Estés argues in Women Who Run With Wolves (1995) that fairy tales, myths, and stories provide more culturally and spiritually than simple children's entertainment:

Stories are medicine. [...] They have such power; they do not require that we do, be, act anything—we need only listen. The remedies for repair or reclamation of any lost psychic drive are contained in stories. [...]

Stories are embedded with instructions which guide us about the complexities of life. [...]

Stories set the inner life into motion, and this is particularly important where the inner life is frightened, wedged or cornered. Story greases the hoists and pulleys, it causes adrenaline to surge, shows us the way

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<sup>10</sup> This is a revision of the wicked stepmother trope common in fairy tales.

out, down or up, and for our trouble, cuts for us fine wide doors in  
previously blank walls, openings that lead to the dreamland, that lead  
to love and learning [...] (15, 20)

These characteristics, the powers that stories and myths hold, are all true for Ofelia. Her books guide her, teach her, and literally give her the tools to cut open the doors in her previously blank walls. Though there is a difference between magic and imagination, stories and reality, these concepts are all connected under magical realism. Stories feed Ofelia's imagination, an imagination which helps her to see the magic that surrounds her in her reality.

Pan's Labyrinth begins with Ofelia and her mother moving to the isolated mill in the country where Vidal, her new stepfather, is stationed. He is a Captain in post-Civil War Spain who rules his household and his military unit with barbaric coarseness and control. His goal as Captain is to eliminate anti-fascist rebels and his goal as "father" is to rule with a similarly iron fist. He is a perfectionist, needing to maintain perfect appearances. He is constantly seen working on his father's pocket-watch, or smoothing out his hair, showing that he is a micro-manager with intense attention to detail. He must be in control of everything. Upon arriving at his home, Ofelia discovers a labyrinth near the mill, which is inhabited by a faun and several fairies who inform her that she is actually the Princess Moanna. The faun gives her three tasks that she must complete in order to get back to her kingdom. Most of the rest of the film involves Ofelia succeeding or failing at these tasks, but it is important to note that, no matter who is giving the orders, she never blindly follows anyone's

directions. Whether it is her mother telling her to be at the dinner table on time or the faun telling her to sacrifice her brother, she follows her heart and listens to her conscience, doing what she knows is the right thing rather than doing what others tell her is right. The fact that she questions authority in both her magical and real worlds makes all the difference in her self-actualization at the film's end.

Despite the writer/director's assertions to the contrary, some have argued that Pan's Labyrinth is not really an example of magical realism because all of the magic takes place in Ofelia's imagination, thus when Ofelia "dies," the magical world of fauns and fairies dies with her. However, it is my belief that Ofelia's magical world is just as real as the "real" world of post-Civil War Spain. Magic and reality can and do coexist in this film, as they do in every other text being explored in this dissertation. The magical world in Pan's Labyrinth affects the "real" world throughout the film in very tangible ways. The mandrake root that the faun gives Ofelia helps heal her mother in reality. In fact, when Carmen chooses to dismiss Ofelia and Ofelia's beliefs in the mandrake root's powers, when she chooses to throw the mandrake root into the fire, her reality is affected once again, only this time the consequences to her actions are dire. She chooses the "adult" world over her daughter's magical world, she chooses her husband's wishes over her daughter's, and she pays for this choice with her life. She—like audiences who refuse to believe in the possibility of magic—suffers from a lack of imagination.

The piece of chalk that the faun gives Ofelia also reflects the ways in which magic affects reality. The chalk allows Ofelia to get into Vidal's room despite her

having been locked in an attic. The fact that Vidal later picks up the piece of chalk that is left in his room proves that these two worlds have collided. As del Toro himself has pointed out in the film's director's commentary, there is no other explanation for how the chalk gets into Vidal's room besides the fact that Ofelia put it there herself after she literally drew her way in. The fact that the magical world so clearly interacts with the non-magical world shows that this magical world is much more than simply the figment of a child's imagination.

Some would point to the final confrontation between Vidal and Ofelia in the labyrinth at the end of the movie as evidence that the faun and fairies are not real. Since Vidal does not see the faun when they are both in the labyrinth, it might be asserted that the faun must not be real. However, this scene does not prove that the faun does not exist. It only proves that Vidal cannot see the faun. It only proves that he has lost the "war against the imagination." Sometimes, magic is not visible to everyone, but only to those with the eyes to see it. That does not make it any less of a reality. This belief that Vidal's lack of vision proves that the faun is merely part of Ofelia's imagination illustrates the way our culture is so willing to dismiss children. Even though Ofelia clearly sees and speaks to the faun in this scene, audiences are more willing to believe the perspective of a murderous and evil man because he is an adult than the perspective of our heroine because she is a child.

While the Beat texts I explore deal with varied and nuanced "battles" and oppressions, different from Ofelia's, both the magic that surrounds her and her resistance—her willingness to look her monsters in the face and say "I am the

Princess Moanna, and I'm not afraid of you" (Pan's Labyrinth), seeing in herself what others do not see—that is most reflected in these Beat texts. Ofelia always trusts her instincts and follows her intuition rather than relying on the judgment of those around her. For example, accompanied by three fairies, Ofelia is given the task of retrieving a dagger from behind one of three possible locked doors<sup>11</sup>. The fairies try to steer her towards one door, but she disobeys them, listens to her intuition, and opens a different door. Her instincts are correct and she was right not to listen to them.<sup>12</sup> Of course, only a moment later, she disobeys again when she eats two grapes despite the faun's explicit directions not to eat or drink anything in the room. This choice turns out to be disastrous. The monster is awakened, her life is threatened, and two fairies die a bloody and Goya-esque death. Ultimately, however, her decision to disobey the faun at the end of the movie in her unwillingness to sacrifice her brother speaks to her integrity and strength. This decision leads to her earthly death, but "it is said that the Princess returned to her father's kingdom. That she reigned there with justice and a kind heart for many centuries. That she was loved by her people. And that she left behind small traces of her time on Earth, visible only to those who know where to look" (Pan's Labyrinth). These "small traces" serve to further illustrate the collision between worlds. Ofelia leaves her mark. Her three tasks are never about results; they

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<sup>11</sup> The three doors call to mind a classic fairy tale element: protagonists often face challenges or choices in threes. "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," "Cinderella," Rumpelstiltskin," and "The Three Spinners" are examples.

<sup>12</sup> It is unclear whether the fairies are purposely misleading Ofelia. Del Toro has noted that the faun and the fairies are dubious characters. They are not clearly "good guys" or "bad guys." They have the appearance of wanting to help Ofelia, yet there are moments such as this one that make the viewer question their intentions.

are about showing how she makes the choices she makes. Even when she is apparently powerless and hopeless, she chooses to save her brother over herself.

Pan's Labyrinth perfectly illustrates the concept that in these texts, the grotesque and the magical are presented as normal because “reality” can be horrifying *and* marvelous. When “reality” consists of war, death, and injustice, the line between Ofelia’s monsters and her reality becomes very blurred. The “realities” that the protagonists of these Beat Generation texts face may be more subtle than the striking devastation of the Spanish Civil War, but they are no less violent and scary, and in many ways, no less monstrous. All of these characters face adult hardships and tribulations as they discover who they are as they are growing into who they want to be.

## II. Dr. Sax: Magical Realism in a Child's Mad Universe

*Ofelia: Mercedes... ¿tú crees en las hadas?*

*Mercedes: Ya no. Pero cuando era muy niña, si. Vivíamos en una cabaña muy cerca de aquí. Entonces yo creía en muchas cosas en las que ahora no creo.*<sup>13</sup>



In “Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers,” Theo L. D’Haen argues that magical realism, by definition, is a mode of expression that exists on the margins; it is “ex-centric” writing. This ex-centricity is described as “a voluntary breaking away from the discourse perceived as central to the line of technical experimentation” (195). To write “ex-centrally,” or from the margins, not only displaces language and technique by appropriating the more “central” languages

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<sup>13</sup> Ofelia: Mercedes... Do you believe in fairies?

Mercedes: No. But when I was a little girl I did. I believed in a lot of things that I don’t believe any more.

and modes of expression, but it then subverts the very writing it appropriates by breaking away from it. Further, magical realist writing doesn't seek to duplicate "reality" as we know it, but rather it seeks to create an alternative to that reality, one that, as D'Haen argues, often seeks to correct the so-called existing reality:

It is a way to access the main body of "Western" literature for authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspective of, the privileged centers of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender, and yet avoiding epigonism by avoiding the adoption of views of the hegemonic forces together with this discourse. Alternatively, it is a means for writers coming from the privileged centers of literature to dissociate themselves from their own discourses of power, and to speak on behalf of the ex-centric and un-privileged. (195)

Speaking "on behalf of the ex-centric and un-privileged" is precisely what Kerouac does in Dr. Sax, the novel in his "Dulouz legend" where his protagonist Jacky Dulouz grows from innocence to maturity. Coming from "the privileged center of literature," Kerouac chooses an un-privileged protagonist in the form of a child. He tells the fictionalized story of his own childhood in working-class Lowell, Massachusetts, drawing from myth and memory in recreating his youth, the foundations of his life. The helplessness and powerlessness of the childhood experience come through in Jacky's portrait of "the real world," where his brother and his childhood friends die, where friendships are broken, where his father is adulterous and unhappy, and where a terrible flood ravages his neighborhood. As a

child, Jacky faces adult adversities and difficulties as he is still discovering who he is and who he is growing into. By adulthood, most people learn to cope with loss, but Jacky does not yet have the faculties to cope. He is still learning how to deal with life's tragedies, feeling ineffectual and utterly powerless to stop tragedies from happening.

This chapter argues that at first Jacky, Kerouac's alter-ego, may resist growing up, but when he discovers that growing up is inevitable and that nature is bound to take its course, magic enters the narrative as a form of resistance; because he continues to believe in magic and magical forces with childlike faith, Jacky is thus able to grow up without losing his essence, his spirit. In Pan's Labyrinth, Ofelia must prove to the faun that she has not lost her essence before she can reclaim her place in her father's kingdom. Similarly, before Jacky can grow up, before he can come of age, he must prove to himself and to Dr. Sax, his protector, that he won't be tainted by entering adulthood. The faun and Sax serve similar purposes in that neither one of them has any real power to do anything to affect Jacky's or Ofelia's fate, but they are both magical figures who are present in their realities, serving as guides that help them negotiate their journeys into selfhood. However, in magical realism, magical worlds and real worlds often inform one another, and in Dr. Sax, the magical world is often just as destabilizing and confusing as the real world.

Dr. Sax is a novel told from the perspective of an adult narrator looking back on his childhood. This childhood, as our narrator remembers it, is not only one that consists of his family and childhood friends, but several magical figures that play a

part in his life story. There is a castle on a hill in Jacky's neighborhood, and underneath this castle, the Great World Snake sleeps. Several dark characters (vampires and wizards) have congregated inside the castle with the intention of luring the snake out of its resting place, waking it up from its slumber so it will devour, and thus destroy, the world. Dr. Sax, a Shadow-like character, is also dark and magical, but he is a friendly figure who has been working tirelessly with herbs and potions, determined to destroy the snake before the snake can destroy the world. Once Sax and Jacky encounter the Great World Snake, though, Sax's alchemical weapons prove useless, having no effect at all on the serpent. But just when things seem hopeless, a giant bird swoops down from the sky and carries the snake away, eventually vanishing from view. Jacky, Sax, and the rest of the world are saved.

Several of the foundational characteristics of magical realism present themselves in Dr. Sax, from magical elements existing alongside and informing non-magical elements, to ancient myths and local folklore informing the type of magic that emerges in Jacky's reality. Kerouac uses magical realism in the novel as a device that can disrupt the reader's concepts of time, space, and reality, but magic can never halt time altogether. The magic in Jacky's life is unable to prevent the passage of time. Still, our otherwise powerless protagonist finds power through his belief in magic. Though his age in many ways renders him helpless and ineffectual, he is also the only person in Lowell who can see the battle between good and evil that is happening without the other citizens of Lowell ever knowing, just as Ofelia is the only person who can see the faun and fairies. Jacky is aware of his exclusivity in this world,

saying: “The door of the great castle is closed on the night. Only supernatural eyes now can see the figure in the rainy capes paddling across the river” (27). In this sense, Jacky and Ofelia’s powerlessness places them outside of the privileged center and makes them more receptive to the presence of magic within their realities; it gives them “supernatural eyes.” Unlike Mercedes in Pan’s Labyrinth who eventually loses faith in magic and stops believing in fairies, Jacky does not grow out of the ability to see and believe. He is unable to resist growing up, but he is able to resist the sad reality that growing up has meant to the adults around him. At the end of Dr. Sax, Jacky manages to maintain his hope and optimism, even as he has grown from innocence to maturity through the course of the novel.

Kerouac brings magical realism into Dr. Sax as part of Jacky’s resistance toward impending adulthood and the eventual compromising of values and integrity that goes with it. While some might view our protagonist’s desire to fend off adulthood as childish and unimportant, and by extension view our author—on whom Jacky is based— as stunted in his own growth and maturity, this desire to keep the falseness of the adult world at bay is more than a Peter Pan complex or a desire to fend off the responsibilities of adulthood. Part of my argument is that the writers discussed in this dissertation use elements of magical realism to combat, subvert, or reflect systems of oppression in the lives of the protagonists. The cultural vibe in the United States, both when Kerouac was coming of age and when he was writing the novel, was overwhelmingly oppressive. The heyday of Beat culture emerged in the years following dire times in American history. The Great Depression and World War

It were now things of the past, but the dust had yet to settle on a nation that was in a perpetual state of shock. As John Tytell states in Naked Angels: The Lives and

Literature of the Beat Generation:

The postwar era was a time of extraordinary insecurity, of profound powerlessness as far as individual effort was concerned, when personal responsibility was abdicated in favor of corporate largeness, when the catchwords were coordination and adjustment, as if we had defeated Germany only to become “good Germans” ourselves. (5)

After such economic and political turmoil, the nation largely wanted things to be “normal.” And normal meant being a part of the country’s burgeoning middle class.

Kerouac, and many other Beat Generation writers, did not fit into what was being sold to them as “normal” for a variety of reasons, ranging from sexual orientation to economic class, but he felt the environment was stifling and a change was necessary and inevitable. As he said in his essay “The Origins of the Beat Generation”:

woe unto those who think that the Beat Generation means crime, delinquency, immorality, amorality... woe unto those who attack it on the grounds that they simply don't understand history and yearnings of human souls... woe unto those who don't realize that America must, will, is changing now, for the better I say. Woe unto those who believe in the atom bomb [...] Woe unto those who spit on the Beat Generation, the wind'll blow it back. (Good Blonde 65)

Members of the Beat Generation lived in fear of the hydrogen bomb, in a culture defined by McCarthyism, censorship, and consumerism. They didn't want to hide in a middle class bubble or *shop* their fears away with the latest gadgets consumer culture wanted to sell them; they were trying to find and cultivate something "real" in a world they saw deteriorating rapidly into a cultural collapse.

In On the Road (1957), Kerouac's most famous novel, Sal finds himself in a hotel with Marylou, Dean's sometimes wife, telling her the story of Dr. Sax and the Great World Snake:

I told her about the big snake of the world that was coiled in the earth like a worm in an apple and would someday nudge up a hill to be thereafter known as Snake Hill and fold out upon the plain, a hundred miles long and devouring as it went along. I told her this snake was Satan. "What's going to happen?" she squealed; meanwhile she held me tight.

"A Saint called Doctor Sax will destroy it with secret herbs which he is at this very moment cooking up in his underground shack somewhere in America. It may also be disclosed that the snake is just a husk of doves; when the snake dies great clouds of seminal-gray doves will flutter out and bring tidings of peace around the world" (171-72)

Kerouac wrote On the Road one year before writing Dr. Sax, and yet the story was clearly with him. What Sal describes to Marylou is a story of good versus evil. He tells her that the Snake is Satan and that Satan is eventually destroyed by a Saint

called Dr. Sax (an ending which Kerouac chose to change by the time he actually wrote and published Dr. Sax). He also leaves room for ambiguity and unanswered questions, as Sal even considers the possibility that the Snake, conventionally a sign of evil in the Judeo-Christian tradition, turns out to be merely a “husk of doves,” representative of goodness and peace. Sal, and by extension Kerouac, does not explain to Marylou what happens in this story. He allows for the magic to be unresolved and unexplained.

This is not the only instance where Dr. Sax is seen reflected in On the Road. Both texts also deal quite vividly with the protagonists’ dissatisfaction and unhappiness with the modern world. Both texts show Kerouac attempting to connect to the ex-centric and unprivileged. In Dr. Sax, Jacky’s magical world isn’t always pleasant, as is the case with Ofelia’s magical world in Pan’s Labyrinth. Jacky’s magical world often serves as destabilizing force, reflecting just how threatening and unstable his real world is, too.

In Reg. E. Gaines’s spoken word poem “Ode to Jack Kerouac,” Gaines declares that human beings have a tendency to “romanticize, wishing we were what we are not. Having read Jack Kerouac’s On the Road, I’ve often wondered if Jack wished he were Black.” Gaines is partially right. Jack Kerouac—or at least Sal Paradise—did wish he was Black, but Sal mainly did not want to be himself; this is why Kerouac and his fictional alter egos spent so much time *on the road*, escaping a life he saw as fake and unsatisfying.

It was German philosopher and historian Oswald Spengler who most influenced Kerouac's particular brand of romantic racialism—wishing he was, as Sal Paradise articulates, “anything but what I was so drearily, a ‘white man’ disillusioned” (180). As John Lardas points out in Bop Apocalypse, the Beats found in Spengler “the terms and categories” they were looking for both in naming their discontent and in giving them hope for the future (39). Spengler argued that the world was moving towards an inevitable apocalypse, the sort of apocalypse Jacky can see coming in Dr. Sax. Further, in the unavoidable decline of western culture, a new culture would appear, as if by magic. The Beat Generation saw signs of the apocalypse all around them. As is seen all over Beat fiction and poetry, modern American society was viewed as that which would kill personal freedom, expression, and imagination. William Burroughs painted a horrific, science-fiction-like view of the modern world in many of his novels including Naked Lunch (1959) and Nova Express (1964). Allen Ginsberg described modern society as “the machinery of night” or as “Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness!” in “Howl” (1956) (9, 21), with other references to modern society as a demoralizing monster in “Sunflower Sutra,” “America,” and “A Supermarket in California” (all published in Howl and Other Poems, 1956), just to name a few. Gregory Corso famously described the “American dream” of having a family, a job, stability and security as a “pleasant prison dream” in “Marriage” (1957) (Corso 181). The Beats in general, and Kerouac in particular, had a special disdain for the modern world and what it had come to represent. Therefore, the Beats largely read Spengler's The Decline of the West (1918) in light

of their concerns with modernity. As they saw it, the falsehood that surrounded them would surely die and be replaced with a more *real* culture, a culture of authenticity.

Kerouac had a vision of his life as empty, which is best demonstrated in his romantic vision of the *Fellahin*. *Fellahin* was a name that Kerouac used to describe Native Americans, Mexicans, and loosely all people who fall outside of White-Male-America. As Carolyn Cassady recalls, “‘I could never tell exactly if he [Kerouac] used the term to mean the ‘essence’ of a culture, unspoiled by exterior influences, or as Spengler used it (where Jack got the term), who says it means ‘residue’ of a culture after it has collapsed’” (347). My opinion is that to Kerouac, the *Fellahin* meant both. It is both that which is unspoiled by exterior influence and what will remain once modern culture collapses onto itself. As Sal explains it in On the Road, the true *Fellahin* cultures of the world will remain “when destruction comes to the world of ‘history’” as it has “so many times before” (281). The notion of the “basic primitive,” after all, lends itself to both definitions. It is that which is ancient and unspoiled by modernity, and it is that which colonialism could not and cannot destroy, the “residue” of a culture after it has been co-opted. The very concept of the *Fellahin* is magical, in that to have anything unspoiled or untouched by exterior influence, to have anything survive when a culture has collapsed, is magical and amazing.

In On the Road, Sal sets up a clear division between the United States and Mexico, between a false culture and the *Fellahin*:

The boys were sleeping, and I was alone in my eternity at the wheel,  
and the road ran straight as an arrow. Not like driving across Carolina,

or Texas, or Arizona, or Illinois; but like driving across the world and into places where we would finally learn ourselves among the Fellahin Indians of the world, the essential strain of the basic primitive [...]. These people were unmistakably Indians and were not at all like the Pedros and Panchos of silly civilized American lore—they had high cheekbones, and slanted eyes, and soft ways; they were not fools, they were not clowns; they were great, grave Indians and they were the source of mankind and the fathers of it. (280-81)

In setting up these contrasting cultures, Sal says that when driving in Mexico, he can see “eternity at the wheel.” In contrast, the United States and all that it represents simply falls short. The *Fellahin* is sacred and eternal while the United States is secular, transitory and disposable. As a result of this general outlook, Kerouac longed to be a part of the more sacred and eternal community of people, imagined though this “unspoiled” community may have been.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, he describes the Mexican populations of the United States as having been affected by “silly civilized American lore.” Only those who fall outside of American “civilization” are “great” and “the fathers of” mankind. (280-81)

Sal has a romantic vision of the racialized other in On the Road, one which its author appears to share. Kerouac romanticized those whom he saw as authentic or

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<sup>14</sup> Oddly enough, Kerouac mentions individual states in his description of driving in the United States. “Carolina, or Texas, or Arizona, or Illinois” come to represent the United States as a whole as it compares, or contrasts, with his observations about driving in Mexico. In creating this division between north and south, he considers Mexico as a unit, while he separates the United States into small fragmented sections. Ironically, each of the states he mentions has large native populations. He is so determined to get to the “basic primitive” which he envisions in Mexico that he ignores the existence of the *fellahin* in his own splintered backyard.

real as somehow outside of the fake world of the industrial machine. He saw his own world as collapsing into meaninglessness, so those outside of that world were in his eyes superior. Spengler gave Kerouac a vocabulary with which to name and recognize not only the corruption surrounding him, but also what he saw as society's saving grace. This is important to note because it is not only Sal who attempts to resist the falseness of the material world, the "adult" world, but Jacky also tries to evade it in Dr. Sax.

Does the reader admire Kerouac for expressing "a desire to join the excluded others on the margins" at a time when it was "not, of course, unheard-of for American whites [...] to accept the equality of African-Americans, [though] outright emulation was unusual" (Holton 267)? Or do we chastise him for expressing clear cultural misunderstandings and misrepresentations? Indeed, Robert Holton points out that in various places in On the Road, Kerouac does "more to confuse the issues than to clarify them, more to augment than to destabilize the reified racial and gender categories of social identity" (270). When working as a laborer, for example, picking cotton in Southern California with his Mexican girlfriend Terry and her family, Sal glamorizes the experience as somehow freeing and exhilarating. "I was a man of the earth," he muses, "precisely as I had dreamed I would be" (97). He even self-identifies as Mexican at one point: "They thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am" (97). Unlike Terry and her family, Sal has the option of going back to his life in White-male-America. In his "Mexican-ness," he has also appropriated "everything but the burden." As much as Sal might have believed that he really was

Mexican, if only for a brief period of time, Sal never actually *is* Mexican. He discovers that the *Fellahin* is a nice place to visit, but that he does not really want to live there, and ultimately, he does not have to. He finds that the hard labor and impoverished living conditions do not quite live up to the pastoral vision he once had of the racial other. He finds that Terry, like her community, is more complicated than he had previously imagined. He finds that Mexico is not, as he previously thought, the “end of the hard, hard road” (290). And Sal ultimately returns to his previous life. But his dissatisfaction with the “adult” modern world rings true. If Sal Paradise is who Jacky will/would have become had Kerouac’s plan for the Dulouz legend come to fruition, then we can see that the search for authenticity, for elements of magic, truth and beauty in the mundane, never really goes away in his life and mind.

**Carmen:** *A veces pienso que nunca aprenderás a comportarte. Me has decepcionado, Ofelia—y también a tu padre.*

**Ofelia:** *¿Al Capitán?*

**Carmen:** *Mucho. Me imagino que a él le dolerá aún más que a mí. (Ofelia se queda ahí, flotando en el agua. Sonriendo).<sup>15</sup>*

Before we truly understand how magical realism functions in Dr. Sax, some discussion of magical realism as a mode of expression is in order. First, there is much debate about and controversy surrounding what magical realism is and how it should be defined and characterized. Stephen M. Hart, editor of A Companion to Magical

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<sup>15</sup> **Carmen:** Sometimes I think you’ll never learn to behave. You’ve disappointed me, and your father too.

**Ofelia:** The captain?

**Carmen:** Yes. Him more than me.

(The faintest trace of satisfaction is visible on Ofelia’s face.)

Realism, suggests that magical realism is all about perception. Some characters view the magical as though it is, in fact, magical, while others view it as though it is perfectly normal. For example, One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967), largely known as *the* definitive magical realist text, “migrates” in and out of magical realism depending on the social class of the observer; the powerful and the powerless see things differently:

[M]agical realism is born, the novel suggests, in the gap between belief systems of two very different groups of people. What for the inhabitant of the ‘First World’ is magical (a woman who ascends to heaven, ghosts who return to earth, priests who can levitate, gypsies who can morph into a puddle of tar) is real and unremarkable for the inhabitants of the ‘Third World.’ (Hart 3)

Perhaps this explains why characters like Jacky and Ofelia not only have the ability to see the magical elements that surround them, but they accept magic willfully and unequivocally. Wendy Faris says one of the characteristics of magical realism is that “Wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way, accepted – presumably—as a child would accept them, without undue questioning or reflection: they thus achieve a kind of defamiliarization that appears to be natural or artless” (177). As the powerless in their worlds, Jacky and Ofelia are able to see and accept the marvelous as though it is real.

The key issues to remember about magical realism as a mode of expression are that the real as we know it is made to seem amazing whereas the unreal is made to

seem ordinary, readers are torn between two contradictory and thus unsettling understandings of the same event, readers are forced to question traditional ideas about time, space, and identity, and that the magic often draws on early mythologies, ancient religions, and local traditions (Faris 167-82). These elements are not only all present in Dr. Sax, but they are defining aspects of the novel.

The subject of privilege and power gets complicated in a text like Dr. Sax, where Kerouac's protagonist, though still white and male, is in the position of the powerless rather than the power-holder. As a child, Jacky is powerless to make change, powerless to do anything to piece together his world that is rapidly falling apart. In On the Road, when Sal is made to feel helpless and emasculated—"What kind of old man was I that couldn't support his own ass, let alone theirs?" (96)—he is able to easily transition back into his "normal" life on the east coast and into a position of power. The freedom Sal has to move back to his world of comfort and privilege is not an option for Jacky in Dr. Sax. He is a little boy under someone else's control. He does not have the freedom to move and escape. He discovers that having the desire to "escape" is universal, but having the ability to do so is an adult privilege, and is specifically a privilege of privileged adults.

The desire to escape is arguably represented by Dr. Sax himself. Dr. Sax as a character is a magical, if somewhat dark and looming figure, who embodies the human will to interfere with nature and natural processes. His foremost task is to destroy the Great World Snake. Early on, Jacky tells us that Dr. Sax is busy preparing to fight the forces of evil: "Sax worked on herbs and powders for a lifetime," Jacky

says. “He couldn’t run around like The Shadow with a .45 automatic battling the forces of evil, the evil Doctor Sax had to battle required herbs and nerves... moral nerves” (32). Sax doesn’t use modern and industrial weapons. His plan is to use “an alchemic-almost poison art that could cast out a certain hypnotic and telepathic light that would make the snake drop dead” (31). Sax uses magic, not guns. However, besides his all-important task of saving the world from eminent destruction, on another level, on a secret level that even Jacky isn’t aware of, Jacky hopes that Sax will be able to abolish time, to prevent Jacky from entering the false world of adulthood that Sal is able to spend so much time avoiding in On the Road. Jacky says his early memories of Sax are of him standing silently and watching him as he plays in sandbanks with his friends: “Doctor Sax is watching our pathetic game with an inscrutable silence—I look once, I look, he vanisheth on falling horizons in a bat” (45). Sax watches over them, coming in and out of the shadows in the form of a caped crusader or a flying bat. He is a presence in Jacky’s life that encourages him to experience the glee of childhood: “Sax was everywhere [...] his glee supported us and made us run and jump and grab leaves and roll in the grass” (57). He represents Jacky’s desire to keep these childhood experiences, to not have to trade them for adult sadness and falseness. Nobody has absolute control over their own lives, but children don’t yet have the faculties or experience to know how to cope with life’s difficulties, from death to natural disaster, which in Jacky’s case are quite numerous. Given all that Jacky has seen and faced already, of course he would hope to magically fend off the adult complexities of life.

There are characters in Dr. Sax who would appear to espouse Kerouac's interpretation of the *Fellahin* from Spengler's Decline of the West in that they too believe that the world is false and becoming more inauthentic and plastic with every passing day. They too feel that the world as we know it will collapse onto itself in ruin and what will emerge from that collapsed culture will be a rebirth of authenticity and beauty. They anticipate and hope for the day when the Great World Snake will emerge and destroy the world:

“I expect,” said Boaz looking up, “the Snake will devour them that deserve it,” [...].

“Simply—divine!” concluded Baroque closing the book. “It's so refreshing—we need any kind of revival, my dear [...].”

Count Condu was gone—he had transformed himself to his bat-form, while no one looked, and into the moon he Flew—Ah me, Lowell in the night.” (109)

And therein lies one of the destabilizing moral complications in our tale. The characters who appear to be advocating for a Spengler-like revival are the villains in Dr. Sax. In other words, the “bad guys” are rooting for a future that coincides with Kerouac's vision of a *fellahin* world (one where destruction would face those that “deserve it” making room for a revival of the good and pure). But this very reversal of the “natural” social order, the questioning of right and wrong, of truth and falsehood, of dream and memory, helps to establish Dr. Sax as a magical realist novel that tells of our protagonist's journey from innocence to maturity. For instance, it is

widely believed that the “Dovists” in Dr. Sax, a semi-religious group that believes the Great World Snake is actually a benign “husk of doves,” are thinly veiled representations of the Beat Writers themselves. In Book Three, a book of Dovist poems is found and read out loud: “‘On that Day,’ read Baroque, ‘clouds of Seminal Gray Doves shall issue forth from the Snake’s Mouth and it shall collapse into a Prophetic Camp, they will rejoice and cry in the Golden Air ‘‘Twas but a husk of doves!’” (109). Gerald Nicosia claims that the Dovists parody the Beat Generation’s optimism, writing books of poetry that prophesy beatific blessings upon the horror of their age. The fact that the Dovists represent the Beats further complicates conventional notions of good and evil, hero and villain, in Dr. Sax. The “good guys” are ridiculed for their blind optimism. They too hope for the appearance of the Great World Snake, believing that it will in fact transform the world, showering it with blessings in the form of a “husk of doves.” Nobody except Sax seems willing to fight the snake, preventing it from wreaking havoc in some way or another.

In the modern age that Jacky tries to resist through magic, even the magic reflects his confusion and uncertainty in reality. He has no real heroes, nobody he can count on in the adult world. In another example of uncertain heroes and blurred lines between heroes and villains, Dr. Sax himself is also ridiculed in Book Four. In a section that parodies Hawthorne discovering The Scarlet Letter or Melville’s title character in Pierre discovering “Chronometricals and Horologicals,” the writings of

Plotinus Plinlimmon,<sup>16</sup> Amadeus Baroque finds a manuscript detailing a party at Snake Castle attended by pretentious artists who are, with rare exception, scared out of their wits at the mere sight of Dr. Sax. This manuscript is described as “the only existing piece of writing from the pen of Doctor Sax,” who is then described as being “no sophisticated writer” (135). Book Four forces the reader to question the nature of heroism when our hero, Dr. Sax, is depicted as a bumbling fool and an inept writer. Sax is hardly a heroic figure, then, when presented by someone like Kerouac, someone for whom writing is sacred and important, having the possibility to change the world, as an unsophisticated writer.

Magical realism blurs the lines not merely between magic and reality, but between many cultural binaries, forcing readers to question their understandings of the world. The “story within a story” in Dr. Sax, the one that Sax wrote, not only serves to contrast Kerouac’s (or Jacky’s, depending on the reader’s view of things) more sophisticated writing style with Sax’s more linear and traditional style, but it also “reinforces Kerouac’s concept of reality as mirror facing mirror” (Nicosia 404). The discovery of this manuscript adds another layer of mystification to our already blurred perceptions on reality. But it is important to note that even in creating further mystery and legend surrounding this character, Sax, the hero, is ridiculed. He is portrayed as simple, unsophisticated, and ultimately unnecessary, forcing the reader to question his function in the novel and in Jacky’s life. The reader, not knowing how

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<sup>16</sup> This parodying of literary conventions from 19<sup>th</sup> century American novels reflects the type of “ex-centric” writing found in magical realist texts. Kerouac here is writing against tradition, or literary hegemony, by parodying the conventions of the “great American novel.”

the book will end and how magic will prevail, is left wondering: could it be that not just our narrator is powerless, but that magic and its function in the novel is also powerless to change the circumstances in Jacky's life?

As mentioned above, additionally ambiguous is Dr. Sax's status as the hero of our story: he is completely inadequate and ineffectual in his ability to kill the Great World Snake. As the snake rises up and threatens to destroy the world as we know it, Dr. Sax's powders and potions do nothing to stop it:

And suddenly I saw Doctor Sax standing behind me. He had taken off his slouch hat, he had taken off his cape. They were on the ground, limp black vestments. He was standing with his hands in his pockets, they were just poor old beatup trousers and he had a white shirt underneath, and regular brown shoes, and regular socks. And hawk nose—it was morning again, his face was back to normal color, it turned green only at night—And his hair fell over his eyes, he looked a little bit like Bill Hubbard (tall, thin, plain, strange), or like Gary Cooper. (240)

The description and significance of Sax's disrobing cannot be ignored here. Again, there are no heroes in Jacky's world, in reality or in magical reality. Dr. Sax becomes just an ordinary man, a man who looks like a combination of William Burroughs (Bill Hubbard) and Gary Cooper, but ordinary and "regular" nonetheless. Having failed at his mission to defeat the Great World Snake, he is suddenly stripped bare, having removed his clothing, his identity. He stands there vulnerable, stripped of his magical

armor. Note the connotations behind Kerouac's word choice when he describes Sax's clothes lying on the ground as "limp black vestments" (240). He is not only stripped of his protective covering, but he is completely emasculated.

One of the most quoted lines from Dr. Sax perfectly illustrates the haziness of reality in the novel: "Memory and dream are intermixed in this mad universe" (5). Whether Jacky's story is dream or memory is ultimately inconsequential. But that is another manner in which magical realism is closer to reality than realism ever could be. How often in our own lives do we intermix dream and memory? Or how often is a memory simply false or stretched in some way? Indeed, much of the controversy surrounding life-writing stems from this very issue. James Frey's memoir A Million Little Pieces received national notoriety when it was revealed that much of the autobiography was completely fabricated. However, Frey stood by his story, claiming that the book contained the essential truth of his life. He presented the story the way he remembered it, but dream and memory are often intermixed. As memories, the events and characters presented in Dr. Sax make up the essential truths of Jacky's life.

Like with Ofelia in Pan's Labyrinth, in Dr. Sax the reader is left to decide whether to believe the child protagonist when he claims to see magical figures that nobody else can see, whether we choose to believe that what Jacky tells us is dream or reality, and ultimately whether that even matters. As with del Toro's film, many observers and readers might claim that Dr. Sax, Count Condu, and the other magical inhabitants of the castle on Snake Hill are merely a part of Jacky's overactive imagination. But the unreal and magical elements in Dr. Sax are always presented as

true and real in the text. On the other hand, the reader can see right away that the mundane or “normal” elements of the text are often described unreal or as “dreams,” as things that aren’t present in reality. These are the opening lines of Dr. Sax:

The other night I had a dream that I was sitting on the sidewalk on Moody Street, Pawtucketville, Lowell, Mass., with a pencil and paper in my hand saying to myself “Describe the wrinkly tar of this sidewalk, also the iron pickets of Textile Institute, or the doorway where Lousy and you and G.J.’s always sittin and don’t stop to think of words when you do stop, just stop to think of the picture better—and let your mind off yourself in this work. (3)

The mundane in the above description is presented as practically marvelous. What we have embodied in the first long sentence of the novel is 1.) a representation of Jacky’s waking reality, or the physical world; 2.) a dream of the physical world; 3.) an artistic representation of that physical world, as Jackie is writing in his dream; and 4.) the novel itself as an artistic representation of that dream representation. Kerouac is doing all he can to destabilize time, place, and reality. This is important to note because not only does this reflect one of the key characteristics of magical realism, but in this novel, magical realism is employed in Jacky’s attempts to resist the passing of time, to resist his emergence into an adult (read: false) world. This blurring of time, space, and reality also accurately represents a blurred childhood memory as it exists for the adult Jacky, looking back on his life. Further, the reason Kerouac forces his reader to question all these aspects of authorship, illusion, dream, and memory in Dr. Sax is to

present reality as something that is unstable for Jacky. Again, if magical realism is paradoxically more realistic than realism, this is an example of that. The magic appears destabilizing, just like Jacky's reality, a reality he tries to resist because it is so volatile and difficult.

Dr. Sax isn't the only text where Kerouac plays with the reader's expectations and notions of time and place. In The Subterraneans (1958), for example, as Leo Percepied is describing the moment he first sees Mardou, Percepied the writer interjects with commentary on Percepied the character: "not a piece of my pain has showed yet—or suffering—Angels, bear with me—I'm not even looking at the page but straight ahead into the sadglint of my wallroom and at Sarah Vaughan Gerry Mulligan Radio KROW show on the desk in the form of a radio..." (2). The writer disrupts the narrative to discuss the writing process (how it heightens the pain rather than reducing it) and to describe his own surroundings before going back into the narrative surroundings of his friends outside the bar "sitting on the fender of a car in front of the Black Mask Bar on Montgomery Street" (2). Whether the writer in question is intended to be Percepied reflecting on his own writing process or Kerouac disrupting his own story is up to the reader to decide.

Kerouac confuses concepts of time and reality elsewhere in Dr. Sax, as well, further illustrating the volatile and unstable nature of his real world. In describing his older brother's appearance after he died, Jacky says: that "he lay with the stillness and the face of my former wife in her sleep, accomplished, regretted" (66). This passage does two things. It establishes the maturity his brother held at such a young age (a

theme Kerouac would continue to pursue in Visions of Gerard), and it also further complicates the reader's notions of time and space. Nicosia points out that for Kerouac, time and space collapses upon itself "Dependent on the emotion" he's trying to evoke (397). The validity of his statement isn't as important as the emotion behind it. The voice of the writer interjects the narrative once again, using future "memories" to describe childhood memories. After all, Jacky has no idea what his former wife's face looks like when she sleeps because as a child, he has no wife, much less a former one.

This scene is further complicated because Jacky describes church, often considered to be a place of sanctuary and peace, as a place of death and horror, further unsettling the reader's concepts of reality. "I gave up the church," Jacky says, "to ease my horrors—too much candlelight, too much wax." Fiona Paton argues that Jacky partially creates Dr. Sax as an imaginary friend of sorts, one whose job is to guide him from the relative familiarity of childhood to the dark uncertainties of adulthood:

But despite the obvious warmth and security of this Pawtuckville community, young Jacky is haunted by intense fears of death and evil, fears engendered largely by the emphatically dark Catholicism of his upbringing. [...] Dr. Sax, simultaneously fearful and paternal, helps Jacky negotiate his way from childhood to puberty, replacing religious nightmares with the more manageable fantasies of Pulp Fiction. (Paton 122)

Like Ofelia's relationship with her faun and fairies in Pan's Labyrinth, it could be argued that Jacky has created the magical creatures in his world as a coping mechanism. When he feels unable to control the difficult circumstances that surround him, perhaps he does create an imaginary world that he can control through the power of his imagination. But I stand by my notion that these creatures are real, as are the ones in Ofelia's world. They aren't Jacky's creations; they exist in his world. They are just as much a part of the fabric of Jacky's childhood as his mother and childhood friends are. For one thing, Jacky continues seeing Sax around Lowell even after he has matured, proving that he is not merely the figment of a child's overactive imagination, but instead, as Stephen M. Hart notes in A Companion to Magical Realism, a sign that Jacky is one of the ones who has the eyes to see. He treats these magical beings and situations as though they are perfectly normal, because to him, there is no difference between Sax, Condu, and his neighborhood friends. They all exist in his "mad universe" (5). Paton herself notes that as the book progresses "the line between reality and fantasy grows ever more uncertain" (122), just as it does in Pan's Labyrinth. Dr. Sax's role may in fact be that of one who guides Jacky from innocence to maturity, but that doesn't make him an imaginary friend.

Further, while it is true that Jacky has fears that are magnified by his Catholicism, Jacky's relationship with religion and spirituality is too complicated to reduce to a formulaic assumption like he is replacing one "religion" with another that is somehow easier to manage. He is not replacing the complex world of Catholicism with a simpler faith and belief in the healing powers of popular culture. Clearly,

Jacky's relationship with pulp fiction and pop culture is not easy to manage, since our pop-culture hero ultimately proves himself unable to save the day in the end.

As I've already stated, the most interesting and ambiguous character of the "magical" characters is obviously Dr. Sax himself. He is inspired by The Shadow, a radio program and comic book series that Kerouac enjoyed as a child. Like Sax, The Shadow is an ambiguous character. Perhaps he knows "what evil lurks in the hearts of men," but his dark and menacing laugh can't help but send chills down the spines of loyal radio listeners. One can't help but hear the Shadow's laugh when they read Dr. Sax's laugh in Book One: "Mwee hee ha ha ha" (21). The main difference between these two figures is that Sax is meant to serve as a guide for Jacky, leading him through his childhood experiences into adulthood, while The Shadow allows Jacky to retreat into childhood fantasies. While Sax gets him through his problems, Jacky looks to The Shadow as a form of escape from his overwhelming problems. "I lay reading The Shadow Magazine, or feebly listening to the radio downstairs in my bathrobe [...] so secure did I become that death vanished into fantasies of life" (148). It is here that the reader sees the power of popular culture to help Jacky escape from the darkness of his reality. So on the surface, Paton's idea that Jacky would create Dr. Sax as a personal substitute for The Shadow might seem reasonable. But again, I assert that Sax is a real magical figure, a magical figure that exists in Jacky's world, while The Shadow is an imaginary figure, one that allows him to escape his reality, something that the magic in magical realism would never allow him to do.

Lest readers see escape as the primary function for *The Shadow*, Sax, and popular culture in general in Jacky's life, his relationship with popular culture is complicated. Even popular culture doesn't always serve as an escape for Jacky. After his rejuvenating encounter with the Shadow, Jacky later describes seeing the movie Trader Horn (1931) and says that the characters and scenery in the picture remind him too much of home:

the hill resembled *exactly* the dreaming farm hill on the top of Bridge Street where I saw that Castle rising like a gray smoke—over its bare bald top (in the movie there it was) came this mass of screaming demons with teeth and bamboos—with their draught—I was convinced the end of the world was coming and these demons were going to come swarm over a sunny hill like that in every town and city in the United States [...] (150)

As opposed to his escape into The Shadow which makes death “vanish into fantasies of life,” seeing this movie only renews and enhances Jacky's fear of death instead of allowing him to escape it. It is also worth noting that that here, once again, the “fictional” world infiltrates the “real” world. Unlike when he merely fantasizes about The Shadow, when watching this movie he becomes convinced that the fictional world he sees on screen mirrors an inevitable reality of imminent death and destruction, blurring the boundaries of his world in a magical realist style.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> However, if one of the characteristics of magical realism is that it makes more “central” those on the fringes or margins of society, then the way Kerouac reinscribes notions of white America as the “center” while demonic “savages” with “teeth” and “bamboo” remain “othered” seems to counteract, at least on some small level, his blurring of “reality” and “fiction.”

At such a young age, Jacky has been surrounded by death. The actual death of Jack Kerouac's older brother Gerard clearly had a huge impact on him as a person and as a writer. Kerouac was four years old, but it was a memory that he constantly returns to in much of his fiction. Early in Dr. Sax, our narrator speaks the cryptic warning, "Step softly, ghost." In Jacky's case, these ghosts are both the figurative ghosts of his youth and the literal ghosts of young friends and family whom he has seen die. Jacky's family moves to Pawtucketville after Gerard's death, where he soon faces the death of Zap Plouffe, "Gene's and Joe's kid brother [...] Zap's foot was dragged under a milk wagon, he caught infection and died" (41-42). Later G.J. becomes convinced that "Zap's ghost is in the goddam park" (42). In addition to Gerard and Zap, "A kid across the street from Joe's dies, we heard wailing; another kid in a street between Joe's and mine died" (66), Jackie's dog (aptly named Beauty) dies the same day Jacky masturbates for the first time—"Beauty dies the night I discover sex, they wonder why I'm mad" (121). There is also the man with the watermelon who has a heart attack and dies in front of Jacky and his mother. All this death has an incredible effect on Jacky. "We told pop about the dying man," he says after seeing the man with the watermelon die. "[G]loomy music played in my soul" (145). As a result, Jacky is faced with a "constant fear" that "either or both of my parents would die" (146). This is a fairly common childhood fear, but the potential reality of it is heightened by Jacky's premature awareness of and exposure to so much death and pain. Again, because of what he has witnessed in his short life, Jacky tries

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to resist growing into a world filled with death and despair through his belief in magic.

Of course Jacky doesn't only experience loss through death in his young life:

I was in love with Ernie Malo, it was a real love affair at eleven—I tiptoed on his fence heartbreakingly across the street from school—I hurt him once with my foot on the fence, it was like hurting an angel, at Gerard's picture I said my prayers and prayed for Ernie's love. Gerard made no move in the photo. Ernie was very beautiful to my eyes—it was before I began to distinguish between sexes—as noble and beautiful as a young nun—yet he was just a little boy, tremendously grown up (he became a sour Yankee with dreams of small editorships in Vermont). (73)

Jacky discovers that even the purest love, the most beautiful and real love, forms no permanent bond. Jacky accidentally hurts Ernie, the object of his love and admiration, and Ernie will later become an unlovable sellout anyway. It is precisely Ernie's fate that Jacky tries to escape in his trying to evade and escape adulthood. He does not want a "sour" life filled with "small" dreams and mundane employment. Jacky once saw Ernie as an angel, so much so that he prayed at Gerard's picture, Gerard being an actual representation of sainthood on this earth, for Ernie's love. This signals both a mixture of magic and reality, as this boy is an angel on this earth, and the beginnings of a complicated relationship with religion for Jacky, as he is praying for the love of another boy, though he does make it clear to the reader that he was in love with Ernie

before he began differentiating between the sexes. Even still, he does describe what is at the very least a homosocial romance as being a pure and beautiful love. Love and sex has not yet been complicated and reviled by outside “adult” influences, another example of the false and oppressive adult world ruining and marring something beautiful. When Jacky describes Ernie as being “as noble and beautiful as a young nun—yet he was a little boy” (73), he recognizes the implied gender confusion, as he feels the need to clarify (“yet he was a little boy”), but he does choose an image of purity, holiness, and femininity to describe this boy’s beauty.

Yet this love fades. It doesn’t last, which is a lesson Jacky learns from his father at the end of Book One, as well: “it’s a dirty snaky deal with a fancy name—called L-I-F-E—more likely H-Y-P-E... How rotten the walls of life do get—how collapsed the tendon beam...” (77). Jacky learns that life has no lasting substance as he grows into adulthood, which is partially why he’s so eager to prevent that growth from occurring. His brother, a person whom both Jacky in the text and Kerouac in reality saw as the “holiest” person he would ever know, dies when he is still young, uncorrupted, and somehow wiser than the rest of the world. Jacky sees that he always seems to lose that which he holds most dear: nothing that’s good in life is permanent, and he senses that this condition will only worsen as he ages, so he longs to hang on to the “good” for as long as he can.

**Mercedes:** *Y si el doctor tiene razón-- ¿y no podemos ganar?*

**Pedro:** *Por lo menos se lo pondremos difícil a ese hijo de puta.*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mercedes: What if the doctor’s right and we cannot win?  
Pedro: Well, at least we’ll make things harder for that bastard.

Magic not only serves as a means of trying to fend off impending adulthood and the perceived compromising of values that goes with it, but it also makes a not-so-subtle statement about cold war and consumer politics of the time, a part of this adult world that Jacky is resisting, to be sure. When Sax and Jacky sit back and watch as “Showers of black dust ma[k]e a shroud of wings and droop-drape bierlike background in the clear sky like a thundercloud without sense” (241), the reader can’t help but associate this image with mushroom clouds and atomic bombs. The bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the Korean War, all clearly influenced Kerouac as he wrote Dr. Sax in 1952.

One of Kerouac’s many dastardly villains is Count Condu the vampire. Described as “sibilant, sharp-tongued, aristocratic, snappy” and “severe, prim, unemotional, Nazi-like” (23) he represents the sort of blood-sucking official who seeks personal and professional gain over all else, even the imminent destruction of the world as we know it. He and his companion Contessa de Franziano (who speaks like a stereotypical Old-Hollywood seductress), sound like politicians as they discuss the “bureaucratic difficulties” surrounding their “mission” (24). They also talk about blood both as currency and religion, reflecting the religious solemnity we give money in our own spiritually dead modern culture. His fittingly named character The Wizard Faustus speaks to some of what Kerouac was trying to get across in this novel. Dr. Sax’s subheading is “Faust Part Three,” and in many ways, Kerouac’s characters share similarities with Goethe’s. They too are torn between earth and heaven—in

Kerouac rendered as reality and magic— and they fluctuate between wanting to experience life and seeking to retreat from it. Further, Kerouac felt that in the time since Goethe completed his epic poem, Western Civilization had completely sold out, seeing Faust's pact with the devil come to fruition (Nicosia 392).

Inez Hedges, author of Framing Faust: Twentieth Century Cultural Struggles, notes that no one character in Kerouac's novel truly represents or takes part in a Faustian bargain, but many of the characters in Dr. Sax have pronounced Faustian characteristics. The Wizard Faust not only shares his name, but is "entirely given over to the destruction of the world. The novel's namesake is "a rather benign embodiment of the Faustian, a magician who works for the good" (174). There are even moments where Jacky goes through a Faustian phase, dressing up like Mephistopheles and taking on the persona of "The Black Thief" who steals his friends' possessions and leaves them mysterious notes. So Kerouac's emphasis in drawing on the Faust myth is not on a destructive pact with evil forces, but instead on "the Faustian as liberation from conformity and the claustrophobic atmosphere of the small town" (175).

The Shadow and Dr. Sax are both ambiguous characters. While Sax is the "good guy," he also lurks in darkness and has the appearance of evil, with his sinister laugh, his black cape, and his green face. Jacky even wonders at one point, as Sax turns into a bat and flies away, "what great difference was there between Count Condu and Doctor Sax in my childhood?" (46). He is asking what the difference is between our hero and our villain. Dr. Sax is a character who is both a paternal

protector and a scary, shrouded figure. He is our hero, and yet he is ineffectual and unable to stop the snake:

And he's standing there saying "Goddam, it didn't work." His normal voice is rueful. "Funny thing is, I never knew that I would meet Judgment Day in my regular clothes [...]"

He said "Ah you know, I always thought there'd be something dramatic in dying. Well," he says, "I see that I have to die in broad daylight where I go around in ordinary clothes." He had wrinkles of humor around his eyes. His eyes were blue and like big sunflowers in Kansas. There we are, on this poorass field, watching the tremendous spectacle. "The herb didn't work," he said, "nothing works in the end, you just—there's just absolutely nothing—nobody cares what happens to you, the universe doesn't care what happens to mankind... Well, we'll just let it go at that, there's nothing we can do about it." (240-41)

As with Pan's Labyrinth, there is a point in this story where everything seems to be going terribly wrong. In the film, Ofelia's mother has died, the faun has turned his back on her for failing to follow directions on her second challenge, and she is locked in the attic with little hope for the future. In the novel, there comes a point where there simply appears to be no hope for humanity. And as is true with Pan's Labyrinth, the ultimate resolution is one that simply goes beyond human understanding. As Del Toro said in his director's commentary of the film, when Pan's Labyrinth opens, the very first thing the viewer sees is blood going back into Ofelia's

nose, which is our cue to understand that this isn't a story about a little girl's untimely death; it's a story about a little girl's rebirth, into the self she was always meant to be. This conclusion may go beyond reason, but so does magical realism.

Just when things look bleakest for Jacky, the unknowing citizens of Lowell, and the world at large, a giant bird comes out of the sky and carries the Great World Snake away: "the Great Black Bird came down and picked it up with one mighty jaw movement of the Beak, and lifted it with a Crack that sounded like distant thunder, as all the Snake was snapped and drawn, feebly struggling, splashing sweat—" (244). Awestruck and disbelieving, Dr. Sax stands, "with his hands in his pockets, his mouth dropped open, uptilted his searching profile into the enigmatic sky—made a fool of—'I'll be damned,' he said with amazement. 'The Universe disposes of its own evil!'" (245). The mystery surrounding this conclusion is the epitome of magical realism. The events are not explained; they just are. Where does this bird come from? Where is it going? What ultimately happens to the snake? Where does it go? All of these questions remain unanswered at the end of Dr. Sax. Like any magical realist text, the reader is simply supposed to accept the book's mysteries as truth, with faith like a child. In this case, the Universe disposed of its own evil; magic saved the day.

There are multiple interpretations as to what happens at the end of Dr. Sax, or how exactly the universe disposes of its own evil. Allen Ginsberg felt that when Jacky sees the snake rise farther and farther up, "into the original Giant Bird Cloud" (244), that the snake itself has turned into a cloud of doves, thus fulfilling The Dovist prophecy. This notion of evil dissolving into good also reflects a particular Zen

Buddhist worldview. The ying and the yang would be represented in the snakes and doves coexisting as one being. It would turn out in the end that there was a little bit of good even in the living embodiment of evil, which also, of course, reflects the ambiguity and boundary blurring of magical realism.

R.J. Ellis claims that all of Jacky's masturbatory fantasies throughout the book lead to the novel's inevitable climax. The snake is aroused from his lair and doves spurt out when orgasm is achieved. As Boaz believes in Dr. Sax: "Dovism was the idealistic left of the Satanic movement, it claimed that Satan was enamored of doves, and therefore his Snake would not destroy the world but merely be a great skin of doves on coming out day, falling apart, millions of come-colored doves spurting from it as it shoots from the ground a hundred miles long" (Kerouac 230). While this Dovist account is certainly very phallic and suggestive, what complicates Ellis's reading is the fact that this is not what actually happens in the text. The giant bird carries the snake away, and while it is open to interpretation whether or not the snake itself disintegrates into a cloud of doves, the sexual undertones of the prophecy are clearly absent in the reality of what happens at the end of Dr. Sax. Like Pan's Labyrinth, the ending to Dr. Sax is decidedly more spiritual than anything else, certainly more spiritual than sexual. In Pan's Labyrinth, Ofelia becomes a princess in her father's kingdom after sacrificing herself for the sake of another. She makes a Christ-like sacrifice and is rewarded with treasures in heaven. One of the characteristics of magical realism is that readers may be torn between two conflicting perceptions of the same event, thus unsettling their understanding of reality as it is

presented in the text. All the questions at the end of Dr. Sax lead to these sorts of contradictory understandings of the same event. Again, the function of magic in this text is to help Jacky negotiate his harsh reality. When reality is unsettling and destabilizing, so is the magic that informs it. Hence, there are multiple understandings of the same magical event.

This isn't to say that sex is absent from Dr. Sax, but sex is present largely as one of the complications of the adult world which Jacky hopes to defy through his belief in magic. Again, Jacky hopes to prevent the passage of time through magic. He hopes to resist entering an adult world of false hopes and broken dreams. Book One really delves into Jackie's discoveries about sex and sexuality in surprisingly candid ways. Indeed, Gerald Nicosia argues that the key discovery of Book One is that sex and "all other solutions" just lead back to more loss and death. While reaching sexual maturity and having a sexual awakening is often one of the markers that the protagonist has gone from innocence to maturity in a typical coming of age story, sex does not serve that function in Dr. Sax. Jacky discovers sex before he comes of age, and it is a marker for the immaturity of the adult world and escape in the novel more than a marker for self-discovery and awareness.

There are many indicators throughout Kerouac's fiction that childhood is often depicted as more mature than adulthood whereas adults in his fiction are often depicted as stunted in their growth and maturity. Dean Moriarty in On the Road comes to mind. But nowhere is there a clearer depiction of the maturity of childhood than in Visions of Gerard. The novel begins with the narrator saying that Gerard died

at the age of nine and that he had “blue serious eyes” (1). He places Gerard in the same company as Buddha and Christ, as all three of them helped to awaken him to “pure bright truth: All is Well, practice Kindness, Heaven is Nigh” (6). Contrast this with depictions of Emil, their father, who fights with their mother, and avoids the difficulty and sadness of Gerard’s illness and death by going out and getting drunk. At one point, Gerard wonders why the birds won’t come to him. He wonders if they know that he’s not mean like other people and that he won’t hurt them. ““They avoid me like a rat dripping bacteria—like a falcon—like a man”” (21), a man, a member of the adult world, being just as vile and dangerous as these other vile dangerous things.

In Dr. Sax, Jacky discovers his sexuality with the help of the other neighborhood boys. Jacky tells of Zaza, “a moronic French Canadian sexfiend” whom he sees masturbating, which Zaza apparently did quite often “in public to amuse Vinny” (68).

[...] we began to have less childlike pursuits haunted by darkness and goofs—Later we simply forgot dark Saxes and hung ourselves on the kick of sex and adolescent lacerated love... where everafter the fellows disappear... There was a great big whore called Sue, 200 pounds, friend of Charlie’s, came calling at Vinny’s, to sit in rockingchair and yak but would sometimes throw her dress up to show us herself when we made cracks from a safe distance. The existence of this huge woman of the world reminded me that I had a father (who visits her purple doorways) and a real world to face in the future. (70)

Here Jacky asserts that the adult world uses sex to forget, again illustrating that in this text, sexual discovery does not mark a transition into maturity, it marks a type of regression into adulthood. For Jacky, though, the adults around him serve as a sad reminder that he too will have to grow up, try as he might to evade that fate. The fact that his father avoids “the real world” by visiting Sue’s purple doorway illuminates for Jacky that that adult world is something that even adults have trouble negotiating. He does not look forward to his own future, as he sees it projected by his father and the other adults in his life. Jacky describes a later instance when he comes across a couple having sex in public:

We found fat lovers disentangling huge dimpled lady legs and hairy manlegs out of an intercourse in a litter of movie magazines, empty cans, rat rags, dirt, grass and straw halfway up the slope in the bushes... a gray afternoon in summer, they were delightfully engaged in a field dump by the river... and at night came back, darker, wilder, sexualler, with flashlights, dirty magazines, jiggling hands, sucks, furtive listens to the Sound of Time in the river, the mills, the bridges and streets of Lowell... wildeyed in heaven they screwed, and went home. (64)

Jacky’s description is hardly romantic, focusing on the couple’s flaws, like their dimpled and hairy legs. Their surroundings are also far from idyllic, as they are surrounded by trash and industrial waste. Despite the less-than-appealing circumstances, the couple is described as being “in heaven” while they are having

sex. They have their “delightful” encounter and then they return home to reality. Sex is a distraction to the adults in Jacky’s world. It lets them forget about their sour lives filled with small dreams.

While the adults around him use sex to forget, Jacky doesn’t ever use *Sax* to forget. He says that he would later “forget” Sax, but Sax is never a tool for escape. Quite the contrary, we find out that Sax is a tool for resistance. Jacky and Sax work to fight the evils that lurk in the night. Even if their efforts are wasted, they are fighting. Jacky and Sax are described as gliding “through backyard shadows silently” (197) before they reach the location where Sax starts “making the herb powder that was going to destroy the Snake” (211). As they prepare the herbs and powders, the result of twenty years of Sax’s research and travels, Jacky is filled with excitement: “There is no time to lose” he exclaims, adding that he could “sense flurrying excitements in the air” (213). They are fighting the Great World Snake. While they fight, the adult world has given up or is simply blind to the magical realities that surround them. The magical elements in this text are resisting and fighting the dominant social order.

One of the things Jacky discovers on his journey is that there are some things that cannot be resisted; there are some forces that cannot be escaped. Death, for example, is ever present, as are the destructive forces of nature. In March, 1936, just after Kerouac turned fourteen, the Merrimac River flooded Lowell, causing great destruction and devastation to the author’s home, his family, and his community. It is something that he never forgot. In Book Five of *Dr. Sax*, entitled “The Flood,” Jacky confronts natural “evil,” or the harm that is wrought by forces outside human control.

The words “River” and “Flood” are consistently capitalized throughout Book Five, giving these things their own character, and the almost-human ability to seek out and destroy. On the morning of the great flood, Jacky finds himself helplessly standing by, watching the destruction take place all around him:

—Deep in myself I’m mindful of the action of the river [...] thundering in midstream like in one lump bump like the back of a carnival Caterpillar pitching green muslin hunks and people screaming inside—only this was chickens, drowned chicken garnished the middle of the rill-ridge roar in centerriver—brown foam, mud foam, dead rats, the roofs of hen houses, roofs of barns, houses— [...]

I stood there on the edge ledge. (162)

Just as Jacky stands on the edge of the river, he teeters on the brink of adulthood. He stands between his childhood and impending manhood. It is clear that there is no turning back time and retreating into childhood since his childhood home is literally being drowned out in a wave of destruction: “We felt grown up because these places and scenes were now more than child’s play, they were now ablated in pure day by the white snow mist of tragedy” (166). The flood literally transforms the scene from one of a child’s playground to one adult seriousness and danger.

***Fauno:** Habrás de meter las tres piedras de ámbar mágicas a su boca. Solo así el árbol volverá a florecer.<sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> **Faun:** You must put three magic rocks in its mouth and retrieve a magic key from its insides. Only then will the fig tree flourish again.

In addition to magical forces saving the day at the end of the novel, it cannot be denied that much of Dr. Sax's conclusion is firmly based in Kerouac's Catholic doctrine. The world is, after all, saved on Easter Sunday, with churchbells ringing in the background. The "great horde of white Doves" (242) that surrounds the Giant Bird of Paradise is symbolic of peace and the Holy Spirit. And the fact that "the universe disposes of its own evil" could be read as a reflection of God's divine grace. Indeed, the final lines of the novel leave the reader with a sense of Jacky's French Canadian Catholicism being restored and rejuvenated: "I found another rose, and put another rose in my hair, and went home. By God" (245). This final sentence fragment confirms a religious reading. He is able to go home, by the grace of God. Throughout the text, Jacky falls into experience, faces his own mortality, and is ultimately saved through some indefinable grace.

But lest we want to read the text as purely Catholic propaganda, Kerouac actually presents multiple faiths and beliefs, many of them rooted in the ancient lore of Mexico, where he was residing when he wrote Dr. Sax. The image of the Great Bird carrying the Great World Snake away in its beak surely conjures images of the Mexican flag. The eagle holding the serpent has always been a part of the Mexican flag and is based on the Aztec legend that the gods told their ancestors to build their city where they saw a bird holding a snake. Paton also points out that the Great Black Bird "evokes the Andean condor, the largest flying bird in the world, which signified the Inca rebirth and salvation" (148). This blending of Christian and pagan systems of belief is reinforced when Dr. Sax cries out "Ah the Great Power of the Holy Sun [...]"

destroy thy Palalakonuh with thy secret works” (238). Our narrator tells us that “Palalakonuh is merely the Aztec or Toltec name (or possibly Chihuahuan in origin) for the World Sun Snake of the ancient Indians of North America” (31-2). Finally, Dr. Sax’s assertion that “the universe disposes of its own evil” is possibly a Christian assertion of divine grace, but it could also have Buddhist roots. We only reach Zen when we learn to subtract ourselves from life’s equations, when we learn to let the universe do what it needs to do without getting ourselves in the way, when we learn to simply *let it be*.

It is important to recognize the significance of the fact that Kerouac blends these systems of belief because this too is a way of resisting dominant ideologies. But are these yet other examples of Kerouac appropriating cultures that weren’t his own for his own benefit? If we keep in mind that America in the 1950’s was fraught with pressures for conformity and homogeneity, to the point of being suffocating, Kerouac’s more “multiple” view of religion and salvation could be applauded. One of the functions of magical realism in this novel has been to resist cultural hegemonies, represented here by impending adulthood. Kerouac’s more inclusive views on spirituality work to resist such cultural hegemonies. Paton asserts that Kerouac, like William Blake and Allen Ginsberg, believed that the imagination is holy, and as such, Dr. Sax “is a testament to that which is holy and redemptive in all of us: the power to believe” (148).

Indeed, Dr. Sax’s ending is filled with hope and redemption. After revealing that once and for all, despite the Wizard’s dissatisfaction, the world has been saved

from destruction, we learn that both Sax and Jacky return to life as usual, but with a hint of optimism that had been absent from previous representations of Lowell and its inhabitants. In the end, Jacky notes:

I have seen Dr. Sax several times since, at dusk, in autumn,  
when the kids jump up and down and scream—he only deals in glee  
now.

I went along home by the ding dong bells and daisies, I put a  
rose in my hair. I passed the Grotto again and saw the cross on top of  
that hump of rocks, saw some old French Canadian ladies praying step  
by step on their knees. I found another rose, and put another rose in my  
hair, and went home.

By God. (245)

Jacky's belief is what saves him in Dr. Sax. Jacky chooses to put a rose in his hair before going home, a rose being a symbol of love and beauty. This action is also a subversive act, as putting a flower in one's hair is traditionally seen as a feminine act. He is resisting the existing social order and accepting truth and beauty where he finds it, regardless of social dictates and mores. Further, while Jacky has been taught by his father and by his own personal experience that all love fades away and that all life can ever offer him is "H-Y-P-E," Jacky still chooses to see the beauty in the world around him, which is itself pretty magical. Jacky has managed to navigate the dangerous path from innocence to maturity without losing his essence, his childlike belief in magic.

“Old French Canadian ladies” pray on the steps of the church that he passes on the way home, not knowing that the world as they know it was very nearly destroyed. Life around Jacky goes on as it always has. But this is nothing new for Jacky. Like Ofelia in Pan’s Labyrinth, Jacky is the only one who can observe the magical forces and figures that surround him. Only Jacky can see Dr. Sax, even after the destruction of the world is miraculously and mysteriously averted: “The Wizard was dissatisfied” Jacky muses, “but the neck of the world was free—” He later observes that he has “seen Doctor Sax several times since” (245), proving that even as he grows up, he has not lost the ability to see magic. Sax has learned to only “deal in glee” because he has learned that growth is inevitable. He cannot stop or prevent natural forces from doing what they will. He can only trust that the Universe will correct itself and dispose of its own evil.

The children are blissfully unaware of Sax’s presence, unaware of the evil that nearly annihilated all of them. Indeed, the magical world and the intense battle between good and evil that takes place in it exists under the unsuspecting noses of all the citizens of Lowell except for Jacky. It isn’t merely the privilege of youth that allows Jacky to perceive and understand these magical forces since other children are clearly blind to it too. As Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee point out in Jack’s Book, Jacky “gently indicts his friends for the crime of insufficient imagination” (9). It has to do with belief. That “holy” power of belief exists within Jacky as it exists within Ofelia. Dr. Sax may be about Jacky’s final weeks of childhood and his journey into adulthood, but it is also about his faith. Jacky may have left his childhood behind, but

he does not choose to trade beauty for ugliness. He does not choose to lead a “sour” life like other adults around him. He puts a rose in his hair and he goes home, both completely changed, and yet—magically— entirely the same as before.

### III. Breaking through the Looking Glass: Grotesque Reflections of Dark Realities in Elise Cowen's Poetry

*Cuentan que hace mucho, mucho tiempo, en el reino subterráneo donde no existe la mentira ni el dolor, vivía una princesa que soñaba con el mundo de los humanos. Soñaba con el cielo azul, la brisa suave y el brillante sol. Un día, burlando toda vigilancia, la princesa escapó.*<sup>20</sup>



Elise Cowen can in many ways be seen as a casualty in the “war against the imagination” (di Prima, *Pieces of a Song* 159). Her poetry reflects the way the outside world of conformity and confinement would try to beat her down and make her “fit.”

Cowen committed suicide at the age of twenty-eight, making her a martyr, a mythic

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<sup>20</sup> A long time ago, in the underground realm, where there are no lies or pain, there lived a Princess who dreamed of the human world. She dreamed of blue skies, soft breeze, and sunshine. One day, eluding her keepers, the Princess escaped.

Beat figure, and someone who would rather die than live a false and shallow existence.

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the way Elise Cowen's poetry uses magical realist elements, specifically elements of the grotesque, to inform, comment on and critique elements in her "reality." A common theme in her poetry is the rigidity of gender roles and much of her poetry can be described as candid expressions of a young woman not really understanding her own sexuality and trying to come to terms with what it means to be sexually mature. This is a young woman who finds that she is not in control of her own life, and that she has actually allowed those around her to define who she is a person and as a woman. What this chapter will prove is that in some of her poems, Cowen uses grotesque imagery to critique her particular reality. The grotesque in these poems serves to reflect the absurdity of traditional views on womanhood, sexuality and gender performance.

Before we specifically look at how the grotesque is employed in Cowen's poetry, some discussion of how the grotesque has been defined is in order, particularly as a framework for how it functions within Cowen's poetry. Philip Thomson looks into the literary history of the grotesque in his book, The Grotesque (1972), and points out that in the twentieth century, the grotesque is defined by the collision of opposite worlds and opposing forces:

Despite some notable, but isolated, attempts in the nineteenth century to define the nature of the grotesque, it was not until the appearance in 1957 of the book by the late German critic Wolfgang Kayser, The

Grotesque in Art and Literature, that the grotesque became the object of considerable aesthetic and critical evaluation. Where previous ages had seen in it merely the principle of disharmony run wild, or relegated it to the cruder species of the comic, the present tendency—one which must be welcomed as a considerable step forward—is to view the grotesque as a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, as an appropriate expression of the problematic nature of existence. It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change and disorientation. (11)

What Kayser established in his groundbreaking and important book on the subject is that the grotesque is primarily about this “violent clash of opposites” described above, an interweaving of completely disparate elements, meant to reflect the absurdity of life. The grotesque, then, may be more shocking in some ways than traditional magical realist texts, but the basic effect of the shock is the same in magical realism as it is in the grotesque. As with magical realism, reading grotesque texts “may also be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective” (58).

Further, in The Spirit of the Carnival (1995), David Danow notes that there are two sides to magical realism: it can either be life-affirming or death-affirming.

The latter kind of magical realism, the death-affirming kind, is also known as the grotesque:

Both magical realism and grotesque realism are born not only from the ancient tale, legend, and myth but also from the darker aspect of folk “wisdom” that includes superstition and false belief. [...] What distinguishes grotesque realism from its “magical” counterpart is, as previously noted, its consistent emphasis upon “evil forces” operating to the virtual exclusion of a potential positive correlative. (120).

The “evil forces” that Cowen projects through her use of the grotesque are the structures that are present as part of the existing social order. In the reality she presents in her poems, there is often no hope and no potential for a positive outcome.

In The Grotesque, Thomson too claims that the grotesque can be seen “as a kind of negative example, the other side of the coin of the beautiful and sublime” (15).

Gabriel García Márquez has said that magical realism is paradoxically a more realistic representation of reality than realism ever could be, because there is “disproportion” to reality, and magical realism can and often does capture that disproportion (Simpkins 148). Like the magic in Pan’s Labyrinth, the unreal elements in Cowen’s poetry are not meant to be escapist; they present an alternate reality, one that reflects the darkness of the real world, not just through a clash of opposites, but through exaggerated and gruesome reflections of reality. The grotesque in Ofelia’s alternate reality often reflects the darkness in her “real” life (the pale man, for example, as was stated in the introduction, is a grotesque and exaggerated reflection

of her evil stepfather). Thomson notes that as well as being characterized by the violent clashing of opposites, the grotesque is also defined through the presence of the “horrible or disgusting” and specifically through the use of “ludicrous exaggeration” (14). As Faris points out, magical realism, like the grotesque, often exists at the intersection of two competing and opposing worlds. Because these two worlds inform each other, one cannot possibly be an escape from the other. They exist together. Cowen’s reality informs the grotesque nature of the unreal elements in her poetry, and these ludicrously exaggerated elements in turn reflect the absurdity of her reality. Also, the tension between competing worlds is what is captured in the grotesque. I will demonstrate, then, the way Cowen weaves disparate elements together, the way she forces opposing images to collide, and the way she exaggerates the ludicrous, horrible and disgusting in reflecting the absurdity of her particular reality and of gender performance in general.

As was stated in the introduction, one might logically question how magical realism—and even the grotesque—is possible in poetry, a literary genre that is by definition metaphorical and thus non-narrative and not, by most accounts, realistic. The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry in English clearly presents the idea that poetry can be “grotesque and allegorical” as a means of suggesting “insightful awareness of human behavior and temperament” (88). Indeed, The Oxford Companion describes several poems of certain twentieth century poets as examples of the grotesque, including William Soutar (508), Andrew Hudgins (238), William Plomer (421) and Susan Ludvigson (316). These examples serve to illustrate that

while traditional magical realism would expect that unreal elements present in the text would be real and that they would exist in the reality of that text, this is not a prerequisite for the grotesque. As Thomson notes in The Grotesque, “Poetry is the genre which is most concerned with intense expression and metaphorical language, and many a poet, in the search for the striking phrase or novel image, has over-balanced into the ludicrous and monstrous” (67). He even notes that metaphors in poetry work as grotesque when images that are “brought together are so disparate, their combination so impossible, that we withdraw from the poetic world and see the image.” In other words, when imagined visually, the “literal meaning” of the metaphorical image “overpowers the figurative” (66). The grotesque shares many of the same characteristics as magical realism, but metaphor is one area in which they differ, in which the grotesque is an offshoot from traditional magical realist themes. It matters not that grotesque elements in poetry are metaphorical. Metaphors can be grotesque if they meet the criteria for the grotesque stated above. They should force opposites to collide, they should be marked by gross and ludicrous exaggeration, and the clashing of opposites should serve to emphasize disharmony as a reflection of reality. As an expression of the grotesque, Cowen’s poetry successfully and jarringly at times subverts reality in the ways that it allows opposing worlds and images to clash and intermingle. Thus, the presence of the grotesque within her poetry is shocking and repulsive partly because it jolts the reader out of his/her comfort zone.

Much like Faris’s list of characteristics that help to define and classify magical realist texts, Thomson lays out a number of characteristics that distinguish the

grotesque in literature. Many of these characteristics reflect or are reminiscent of Faris's list of magical realist characteristics:

1. The grotesque is fundamentally a disharmonious thing, a “violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, as an appropriate expression of the problematic nature of existence” (11). It's about the weaving together of incongruent elements, the result of which is “a strange and often unpleasant and unsettling conflict of emotions” (14).
2. Many forms of the grotesque focus on the presence of “ludicrous exaggeration” or a “co-presence of the ludicrous with the monstrous, the disgusting or the horrifying” (14).
3. Sometimes the grotesque is funny or comical, but with a clear bend towards dark humor, like Swift's Modest Proposal or Kafka's Metamorphosis. It's a type of humor “which is painful, awesome, which knows of evil and the abyss” The grotesque has a way of “emphasizing the dark and terrible nature of some kinds of humor” (16).
4. “The grotesque is the expression of the estranged or alienated world, i.e. the familiar world is seen from a perspective which suddenly renders it strange (and presumably, this strangeness may be either comic or terrifying or both)” (18).
5. The grotesque is by its very nature absurd. It “plays with the deep absurdities of existence” (18).

Cowen's poetry presents a clash of opposing forces. It presents the reader with ludicrous and horrifying exaggeration. It points out the absurdity of her reality, and it is an expression of the estrangement she feels from the real world she inhabits. It is also important to note that like magical realism, the grotesque does not resolve its conflicts. It's not about answers, it's about mysteries. We don't know why certain occurrences happen with the text and no explanations are given or expected.

**Ofelia:** *¿Que es ese ruido?*

**Carmen:** *No es nada, hija. Es el viento... La noche de aquí es muy diferente a la de la ciudad. Allá hay tranvías, los coches—Aquí las casas son viejas. Gruñen—se quejan.*<sup>21</sup>

Arguably the most tragic figure of the Beat Generation, Elise Cowen lived a life brimming with heartbreak and tribulation from beginning to untimely end. She is perhaps most remembered for her relationship with Allen Ginsberg. Cowen and Ginsberg were lovers for a brief time in 1953, when Ginsberg decided to “try” women as a cure for homosexuality. Cowen was twenty years old and Ginsberg was twenty-seven. Later, when Ginsberg met and became romantically involved with Peter Orlovsky, Cowen experimented with her own lesbian relationship. By most accounts, though, she was simply fascinated by Ginsberg. As Joyce Johnson tells it in Minor Characters, “Thus, Elise was a moment in Allen’s life. In Elise’s life, Allen was an eternity” (78). Cowen met Ginsberg and she felt they had an instant connection. They even physically resembled one another, with their dark glasses and

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<sup>21</sup>**Ofelia:** What’s that noise?

**Carmen:** Nothing, just the wind. Nights here are different from city nights. There, you hear cars, trains. Here the houses are old and creaky. Almost like they’re speaking.

intense eyes. “Elise speaks of Allen in a surprising way,” Johnson recalls. “‘Allen is my intercessor,’ she says. An extraordinary statement from a girl who was a Jewish atheist” (76). Ginsberg, on the other hand, would appear to have felt differently about their relationship. He wrote in a letter to Gregory Corso in 1962:

Last week heard from Irving [Rosenthal] and others that Elise Cowen committed suicide and that really gave me turn. I had felt a little responsible for her welfare and hadn't been much help to her when I was around. Always felt revulsion for the death smell in her hair and so always held myself distant from her when she lived upstairs on East Second St. (*Letters* 258)

Cowen suffered from severe depression after graduating from Barnard College. She moved around a lot, from San Francisco to New York, and sometimes she seemingly disappeared from the face of the earth. Her family had her committed to Bellevue, a common occurrence for female misfits in the 1950s, especially those with “lesbian tendencies.” And “misfits” is exactly what the women who identified with this Beat Generation were. As Anne Waldman says in her introduction to Brenda Knight’s anthology of female Beat writers, Women of the Beat Generation:

I knew interesting creative women who became junkies for their boyfriends, who stole for their boyfriends, who concealed their poetry and artistic aspirations, who slept around to be popular, who had serious eating disorders, who concealed their unwanted pregnancies

raising money for abortions on their own or who put the child up for adoption. Who never felt they owned or could appreciate their own bodies. I knew women living secret or double lives because love and sexual desire for another woman was anathema. I knew women in daily therapy because their fathers had abused them, or women who got sent away to mental hospitals or special schools because they'd taken a black lover. Some ran away from home. Some committed suicide. There were casualties among men as well, but not, in my experience, as legion. (x)

Cowen eventually took her own life by jumping out of a closed seventh-story-window in her parents' home in Washington Heights, New York. She was twenty-eight years old.

Cowen's suicide is perhaps the third most remembered and talked about aspect of her life and legacy, next to her relationship with Ginsberg, and the fact that she typed "Kaddish," the long poem that Ginsberg wrote for his mother Naomi inspired by the prayer for mourning in Judaism.<sup>22</sup> None of Cowen's own poetry was published in her lifetime. She did not think of herself as very talented. As Joyce Johnson remembers in "Beat Queens: Women in Flux": "The aspirations she had, she kept to herself. She was obsessed with T.S. Eliot, but majored in psych. I'd show her

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<sup>22</sup> In his essay "How Kaddish Happened," written in 1966, Ginsberg explains:

The poem was typed, I had to cut down and stitch together the last sections of narrative—didn't have to change the expression, but did have to fit it together where it lapsed into abstract pathos or got mixed in time or changed too often. It was retyped by Elise Cowen, a girl I'd known for years and had fitful lovers' relations with. When she gave me a copy she said, "You haven't finished with your mother." (234-35)

the stories I was writing, but she'd never show me her poems. 'I'm *mediocre*,' she told me, pronouncing the word in an odd hollow French way" (44). Many of Cowen's poems and journals were destroyed after her death, her parents disapproving of the lesbian and bisexual themes in some of her writing.

The dangers of being gay, lesbian, or otherwise queer in the 1950s cannot be underestimated. Waldman has already pointed out that women were often institutionalized for loving and desiring other women. Parents of gay and lesbian children had them committed to mental institutions, which led to a climate of secrecy, paranoia, and fear. Lillian Faderman's Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers (1991) points to other social ramifications of "queerness" in 1950s America: "Republican National Chairman Guy George Gabrielson wrote in the official party newsletter early in 1950 that 'perhaps as dangerous as the actual communists are the sexual perverts who have infiltrated our government in recent years.' By April of that year ninety-one homosexuals were fired from the State Department alone" (141). Even the ACLU dared not act in defense of gays and lesbians at that time. In 1957, the ACLU National Board of Directors declared that homosexuality was a "'valid consideration in evaluating the security risk factor in sensitive positions.' [...] Although it took a liberal stand on all other issues, it literally advised lesbians that the only thing they could do would be to 'abandon' their lesbianism and become heterosexual" (144-45). Lesbianism had to be kept secret from the outside world. Gay culture was a truly underground culture in 1950s America. Many of the poems that Cowen's friend and colleague Leo Skir rescued after her death dealt with her struggles with gender norms.

We will never know what was contained in the poems her parents deemed “shameful” enough to destroy.

Life for women in general in the 1950s was trying, but women like Elise Cowen, women who were seen as “different,” faced very difficult, at times excruciating, hardships. As Brenda Knight says in her introduction to Women of the Beat Generation: “Women of the fifties in particular were supposed to conform like Jell-O to a mold. [...] For the women profiled here [in Knight’s anthology], being Beat was far more attractive than staying chained to a brand-new kitchen appliance” (3). As Knight said of Cowen’s upbringing: “Her parents had achieved the American Dream with the perfect house in the perfect neighborhood and the perfect job. More than anything, they wanted the perfect daughter to complete the ensemble, and Elise became the focus of their rages” (141).

Even within the Beat movement, women were often expected to fulfill their socially accepted gender roles. They were still expected to “get the coffee,” so to speak, and they were certainly expected to “put up with” the experiments and lifestyles of the talented men in their lives. As Helen McNeil said in “The Archaeology of Gender in the Beat Movement,” “[T]he Beats have never been seen as a movement engaging with women or responsive to feminist critique” (178). The Beats questioned many social mores and norms, but like the ACLU’s unwillingness to recognize and fight for queer issues in the 1950s, gender politics was one obstacle it seems these otherwise freethinking men could not overcome.

Cowen's life and death are fascinating. It's hard not to talk about them, or at least acknowledge that her suicide happened. Her poetry is rich and textured, but it's textured with her life and her life experience. One can't help but look at her work as a literary biography, a life's story in verse and rhyme. Using poetry as a form of life writing allows the writer to seek out and communicate the most essential truths of her experiences. In Cowen's poetry, one can see not just pain, but the intense struggle to define herself, to construct her identity in relation to the outside world. Her poems really do present a woman coming to terms with who she is and how she sees herself as compared to how others want to see and define her.

Though not an example of the grotesque<sup>23</sup>, one poem that illustrates this struggle to define herself is "Once I knew that just to look,"<sup>24</sup> a poem that clearly takes our speaker on a journey from innocence to maturity:

Once I knew that just to look  
                                   was happiness, grace, beauty  
 activity, romance, love, pagan birth

Once I knew that just to look  
                                   was life enough for me

Now I want the angels for

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<sup>23</sup> Cowen was a very prolific writer, writing hundreds of poems in her lifetime. Of those, eighty three have survived. Not all of her poems serve as examples of the grotesque—some are better examples of confessional poems or lyric poems, for instance. I have chosen to illustrate her poetic use of the grotesque as critique. So the poems I choose, with this exception and one other that I place in a footnote, will illustrate her use of the grotesque.

<sup>24</sup>None of Cowen's poems were given titles. I have chosen to identify them by the first line of each poem.

my family (1-7)

At one point, the speaker claims, to simply observe life was satisfactory enough. At one point, she was able to observe life and see “happiness, grace, beauty.” She was content looking at “activity” and “romance” and “love,” not actually experiencing these things, but observing them from afar. This was her reality, and it used to be “enough.” When she grows from innocence to maturity, though, she loses that optimistic outlook. She wants more than just to look, and she is not given the option for more in her life. As other poems will illustrate further, for Cowen death is presented a viable alternative to living a life where all one gets to do is “look.” Even though this poem is not technically grotesque, it is still death-affirming. She would rather have angels for her family than a family that rejects her and rejects her life choices. These themes of death being preferable to a life of “endless stillness” resonate in several of Cowen’s poems. It is also possible that the angels she discusses in this poem are not the angels she would encounter after death, but the “Desolation Angels” known as the Beat Generation. She would rather have the Beats, the socially outcast artists and poets who had become her friends, as her family than the family she was born into. This is the choice she makes in rejecting “endless stillness.”

Cowen’s poetry, like Allen Ginsberg’s, can be described as confessional poetry. It is raw, highly personal and emotional. It takes on taboo subject matter with reckless abandon. Mental illness, suicide, drug use, blasphemy... nothing is too personal. The poet is indistinguishable from the first-person speaker and the poetry gives access to a deep and real part of the poet’s personal experience. One can’t help

but conflate Cowen and her speaker. This may be a conflation that some critics will resist<sup>25</sup>, but as David Yezzi argues of the nature of confessional poetry: “The ‘I’ of the poem is meant as a direct representation of the flesh-and-blood poet” (15). I argue that this is certainly the case with Cowen’s poetry. Like Ginsberg and Kerouac, Cowen writes about herself and her friends. She and her speaker are one and the same. It is widely believed and understood that the Beat writers tended to conflate their speakers with themselves—Billy Collins said in “My Grandfather’s Tackle Box” of the Beat writers that they took individualism and expressions of self to new extremes “with their revved-up typing, visionary hysteria, and pants-dropping exhibitionism” (84). And though conflating the speaker and the poet is a controversial move, given the confessional nature of Cowen’s poetry and her placement within the Beat Generation, I feel justified in making such a leap.

We have a hard time— issues of poetry, voice, and speakers aside—thinking about and determining issues of self and identity in our culture. These issues of personhood and constructions of self are at the center of all the texts I explore in this dissertation. With Cowen, her poetry takes us through milestones of growth and maturity and coming to a sense of self, until her last poem, “No Love,” culminating her life’s story with her final choice. In the poem that is believed to be the last one she ever wrote (Knight 165), Cowen concludes with the words: “Let me out now please - / -Please let me in” (17-18). This is her moment of strength and maturity. Just

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<sup>25</sup> Tony Triglio has said of Beat poetry that people way too often “collapse poetry into biography [...] The poems are seen only as illustrations of a biography rather than as texts rich in linguistic and cultural meaning” (121). This is particularly true of Cowen.

as Ofelia chooses to give up her life in Pan's Labyrinth, Cowen takes control over her own life at this moment by choosing to end it.

One characteristic of confessional poetry is that it delves into the most brutally honest aspects of the writer's psyche. So as a confessional poet, it seems like Cowen was most true to herself in her poetry. She wrote as if nobody was watching, and as an unpublished poet, perhaps that was her intention. Her work is neither interested in propriety nor acceptability. With each poem, we get a new piece of Cowen's puzzle, a new awakening into her character. These poems work together to reflect the absurdity of her reality and to illustrate how she critiques the dominant social order; she criticizes the notion of growing up into proper and acceptable "womanhood," as womanhood is defined by society at large, and she uses the grotesque in doing so. Indeed, as Mary Russo argues in The Female Grotesque, "the expression of a "female grotesque threatens to become tautology, since the female is always defined against the male norm" (12).

What makes Cowen's poetry distinct from that of other traditionally confessional poets is the way she incorporates grotesque elements into her autobiographical poems, the poems that reflect her reality. In fact, it is the clash between the real and the unreal in her life's story that helps to define her particular brand of grotesque confession. She has the choice to conform to the world that has been forced upon her, or to escape that world violently and ultimately. She chooses the latter. Cowen uses the in-between-ness, the all-at-once-ness, and the absurdity of

the grotesque to comment on the in-between-ness of gender, the all-at-once-ness of time and place, and the absurdity of life.

**Vidal:** *Ofelia*—  
*(Ofelia le extiende la mano izquierda. Se saludan.)*  
**Vidal:** *Es la otra mano, Ofelia.*<sup>26</sup>

In Gender Trouble (1990), Judith Butler demonstrates the way gender is performative, a cultural fiction that is highly regulated and regulatory and repeated through social policing and rigid social mores giving it the appearance of being “natural.” Though it is constructed and not inborn, notions of what gender and sexuality mean are so entrenched in our ways of thinking and being that they appear innate. Gender is not like clothing that can be easily removed and changed or altered. Social norms are simply more invasive than that, as they have established themselves over time.

As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. [...] gender is an identity tenuously constituted over time, instituted in an exterior space through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements,

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<sup>26</sup> **Vidal:** *Ofelia*—  
*(Ofelia extends her hand. He grabs it, firm but cold. It is her left hand.)*  
**Vidal:** *It’s the other hand, Ofelia.*

and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. [...] That gender reality is created through a sustained social performance means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of a strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (178-80)

In short, though we are all brought up in a world where gender performance is repeated and reinforced, gender is never internal, fixed, or specific. It is always "sustained through social performance." Thus, we, as thinking people, have the ability to see through the act, to see that "Genders can never be true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived" (180). Elise Cowen's poetry demonstrates this sort of awareness of—and criticism of—female performance, years before Gender Trouble and Queer Theory even existed. Using the grotesque as a distorted mirror reflecting the existing social order, her poetry critiques the cultural norms that have been handed down to her by an unthinking sexist and heterosexist world. Just as magical realism makes the magical appear commonplace and the real appear absurd, the grotesque in Cowen's poetry also serves to make the real appear absurd. What society views as normal and natural, Cowen reveals to be performative

and bizarre. Her poetry reveals gender norms and social rituals<sup>27</sup> to be mere illusions, to be unreal and ridiculous.

“The Lady is a humble thing” at first appears quite simple and unobtrusive. The first two lines present an example of the grotesque being utilized to critique Cowen’s reality while the last two lines serve to present a vivid image of that reality:

The Lady is a humble thing  
 Made of death and water  
 The fashion is to dress it plain  
 And use the mind for border (1-4)

It is important to note that Cowen uses the word *Lady* instead of *Woman*. *Lady* has prim and proper connotations attached to it that *Woman* does not. A Lady is a woman of a certain social rank, going back to the tradition of the Lords and Ladies. Today the word simply means a woman who is refined, cultured, and of a superior social position. In Cowen’s view, nobody *performs* gender more than a Lady.

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<sup>27</sup> One short poem—only three lines in length—that speaks to the nature of performance and the difficulty of reaching for unattainable social standards is “At the acting class.” This is another of Cowen’s poems that is not an example of the grotesque, but I include here to demonstrate Cowen’s awareness of and criticism of performativity in our culture:

At the acting class  
 The perfect paper daffodil  
 Upstages us all (1-3)

The acting class is a mundane setting, placing us in a “normal” reality before disrupting reader expectation with the absurdity of all the actors in the class being upstaged by a paper daffodil. On one level, it is said that all the world’s a stage, so then the “acting class” is all around us, and we all perform the roles we have chosen or have been assigned. But even if Cowen is speaking literally of an acting class, this poem speaks to the impossibility of playing one’s part perfectly, regardless of the stage. Human beings are flawed. They may play the part of being “perfect,” but perfection is unnatural. The actors are not upstaged by just any flower; they are upstaged by artifice, by an unnatural representation of a natural, and thus flawed, flower. As much as any person—actor—might try to live up to certain rigid social expectations, they are destined to fall short of perfection. The same is true of gender performance in Cowen’s mind. Much as she might try to play the role of the perfect “Lady,” she will always fall short, as is evidenced by her poem “The Lady is a humble thing.”

It is the first two lines of the poem where grotesque images are employed in critiquing reality. These lines are filled with contradiction. This lady is described as humble, and yet she is made of two such disparate elements as death and water. The image of death and decay being mixed with water conjures images of putrid, muddy water. After all, when death is presented as an element that comingles with water, one can't imagine that the water will be clean; it will be dirty, gross, and stagnant. Further, the idea of being made of "death and water" is in itself contradictory. Water is life giving, cleansing, and refreshing. The human body is made up mostly of water. Thus water, as a representation of life, contrasts death. In this line, not only do opposing images collide, they comingle and dwell together within the body of a Lady. To say that a "Lady" is made up of death as well as water says a lot about the nature of a "Lady." A living being made of death and water is macabre, gross, and unsettling. Here, the reader is placed between two contradictory images and asked to imagine these unsettling and contradictory images merging together.

When the spirit is made up of two such opposing forces as death and water, a humble and plain exterior is clearly in conflict with her true self, reflecting another clash within the poem. The essential "nature" of woman in the 1950s was supposed to be plain, soft spoken, and pretty. By arguing that beneath the surface of such a pretty performance is "death and water," an image that conjures pictures of bones and bodies decaying in what should be life-giving waters, Cowen manages to use the grotesque—the clash of opposing and unsettling images—to undercut 1950s views of sexuality and gender performance. Note that even the sound and feel of the poem is

pretty, almost performing the role of a nursery rhyme with its sing-songy and unobtrusive look and feel. Like the “Lady” herself, Cowen’s poem has a soft, innocent exterior hiding a collision of opposing forces underneath. Like the Lady herself, this poem has a rebellious message beneath the surface.

The 1950s female performance that the grotesque is used to reflect is put forth in the last two lines of the poem. These final two lines speak specifically to the idea of gender as performance—the reality that Cowen is undercutting by use of the grotesque: “The fashion is to dress it plain / and use the mind for border” (3-4). Butler could not have said it better herself. Gender is not static over time. Gender is created through social performance, but society changes, as do our notions about sexuality. Cowen’s use of the word “fashion” illustrates that gender is something that is performed, not innate. “The fashion is to dress it plain” suggests that women are “plain” because they are socialized as such. It is what is done; it is what is fashionable. Notice, too, the use of the pronoun “it” in reference to the Lady. Clearly it is also the fashion to objectify women and remove any sense of their humanity. The Lady that Cowen portrays is not even self-realized enough to be called “her;” she is “it.” As Tony Trigilio says, “Cowen’s archetypal female image, a “Lady” who is “[m]ade of death and water,” assumes identity through practices of humility and through the active efforts of others to dress her plainly. She is never quite a visible subject, though she is the object of others” (134). As an object, she has no need for independent thought and so her mind is simply “for border.” She has to live a sweet and humble life. She must resign herself to her “boring little life” because it is seen as

essentially female to do so. The creative forces within her do not matter. This poem demonstrates that outside forces that surround Cowen place unfair and constricting chains upon her, chains of masculine domination and compulsory heterosexuality.

In contrast to “The Lady is a humble thing” which has the appearance of simplicity with layers of depth just beneath the surface, Cowen’s poem “Sitting with you in the kitchen” is one that starts out portraying the norm and then suddenly deviates from that norm. It starts out with the appearance of simplicity and then complicates itself. The poem begins with female performance and ends with male constructs. Further, the male constructs that are presented are absurd. Thus, this poem presents another grotesque clash of opposites meant to undercut social performance:

Sitting with you in the kitchen

Talking of anything

Drinking tea

I love you

“The” is a beautiful, regal, perfect word

Oh I wish your body here

With or without bearded poems (1-7)

Before uprooting the reader from reality, the first four lines all reflect the reality of proper female performance, in a very “real” setting. She is sitting in the kitchen, the obvious location for a dutiful young woman. She is drinking tea and “talking of anything,” again, behaving in ways proper for a lady to behave. Especially in the 1950s, a woman was expected to be a proper hostess; she was expected to keep a

conversation interesting and lively. She had to know about current events and cultural history in so much as she was supposed to entertain and enliven any conversation, certainly not out of personal curiosity or edification. And what more proper forum for the discussion of “anything” than over tea? Sitting and talking over tea seems to be the perfect performance space for civility and high culture. The fourth line on this “proper” theme is made up of the three words most stereotypically associated with femininity and female desire: “I love you” (4).

The poem then takes a sudden turn. It illustrates the way the grotesque can perform the same function as magical realism in that it places the reader firmly in reality before challenging the reader’s understandings of that reality through contrast and exaggeration. It is the last line in this poem that presents the opposing image that clashes with female performance. However, the last three lines of “Sitting with you in the kitchen” not only seem unconnected from the previous four, they seem entirely unconnected to each other. One interesting observation about this undercutting of reality is that Cowen transitions from innocence to maturity in these last three lines. She goes from reflecting proper female performance to challenging, subverting, and questioning typical female roles and asserting a new and different identity.

Before getting to the final grotesque line, I would like to take a closer look at the lines that lead up to it. The fifth line reads: “‘The’ is a beautiful, regal, perfect word” (5). The word “the,” a definite article, marks a noun phrase as *definite*. That is, it refers to something which can be identified uniquely in the contextual or common knowledge shared by speaker and hearer. Why does the speaker make her preference

for the definite article known? Perhaps she is making it clear to the reader that she can be uniquely identified. She is not just *a* woman; she is *the* woman, *the* one, a specific human being with personal thought and emotions. The speaker then gets surprisingly personal. “Oh I wish your body here / With or without bearded poems” (6-7). It appears that she makes her sexual desires known, which is a very assertive and stereotypically masculine thing to assert. Given our knowledge of Cowen’s personal life, it is not a stretch to assume that she is expressing her desire for Ginsberg in these two final lines. She does not care about his art or his celebrity; she only wants him, his body. She wants to be physically near him. If Ginsberg is the subject, the “you” she is addressing, then Cowen’s stated preference for the definite article takes on another level of meaning. She is expressing more than her desire to be seen as “the” woman, or an individual person with individual thoughts and emotions, but she is expressing her desire to be seen as “The *one*.” Recalling Johnson’s observations that Ginsberg was Cowen’s world and she did not carry the same weight in his life, she expresses her desire to be his world, to be “the one.”

The fact that the *poems* are bearded in this piece firmly places this poem within the realm of the grotesque. This image is absurd. It’s also gross on some level, as body hair is not the most pleasant thing to think about and it’s an absurd and grotesque concept to imagine body hair on one’s poems. One might ask why the poem is bearded here and not the subject, the “you” of the poem. Giving poems “beards” makes them masculine constructs and places them outside her grasp as she sits “in the kitchen,” the realm of the feminine. Throughout the course of history, men

with beards have been ascribed various attributes, like wisdom, knowledge, spirituality, sexual maturity, and high social standing. If the “you” in her poem is Allen Ginsberg, then this only reinforces that she wants to know Allen, even as she views herself as inadequate to him and his “bearded poems.” Familiarity with Ginsberg’s Howl also makes the bearded poems a possible metaphor for pubic hair— “who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo...” (10). If the bearded poems are meant to reference this line from “Howl,” then her assertion that she wants to be near his body “with or without bearded poems” would indicate that she is interested in being near him, whether or not sex can be part of the equation, and regardless of his celebrity. Again this sort of candid expression—discussion of bodies and pubic hair— clashes with the image that is presented as her reality: a lady sitting in the kitchen with a cup of tea. The bearded poems disrupt this picture, this image of reality, by presenting a grossly ludicrous image to counter it.

On the other hand, bearded poems may also imply poems as disguise, or hiding place. Thus poems allow her to hide in plain sight. The other possibility, which is contrary to the notion of poems as disguise, is the more religious reading of what is implied by “bearded poems:” an expression of her Jewish culture. Leviticus 19:27 states “neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard.” No matter what other connotations are attached to beards, the fact remains that giving poems beards does masculinise them and place them at odds with the “Lady” she is expected to be. She begins the poem as a lady and ends with a desire to be closer to constructions of masculinity. The bearded poems present a desire to perform masculinity as she sits in

the kitchen performing femininity. This poem plays not only with cultural expectations, but plays with disparate images and makes them interact in ways that destabilize the reader.

On the subject of collisions between opposing forces, “Did I go mad in my mother’s womb” is a poem that is rich with tension. The grotesque is mainly categorized by the tension that exists between opposing forces, and that is the sort of tension that is present in this poem. This piece is basically a lament on how the speaker’s prescribed gender role has driven her mad, and this madness is vividly described in grotesque terms: in the clashing of opposing images and in gross, ludicrously exaggerated images.

Did I go mad in my mother’s womb

Waiting

to get out

As I gadget along the edges of

the perfect point of the hollow

munched tooth of a second

Waiting

To death (1-8)

She starts out by asking “Did I go mad in my mother’s womb” (1) without a question mark at the end of the sentence. This question asks whether we are essential or constructed beings—did she start out mad from the very beginning, or did *life* drive her to insanity? — and the lack of a question mark speaks to her certainty in the

answer to that question: she did not start out mad; if she is “mad” at all, then a mad society made her that way. She goes on to attribute very real and distressing emotions to her unborn self, asserting that as she was in her mother’s womb, she was “waiting / to get out,” even “waiting / to death” (2-3, 7-8). Waiting to death could mean that her waiting seems like an eternity, or it could mean that she is literally waiting to die. Here, just as in “The Lady is a humble thing,” Cowen creates an immediate sense of tension between life and death; the beginning of life is at odds with the end of life. If she is in her mother’s womb waiting to be born, it is absurd that she would also be waiting to die, but again, this illustrates the absurdity and difficulty of life. The grotesque is reflected in the image of a fetus, a being that is not yet born, longing for death. The reader expects an unborn child to wait for birth, to wait for life to begin. In having a fetus waiting for death, Cowen presents a clash of opposites—birth and death— as a reflection of the grotesque, representing her absurd reality.

Just as the fetus waiting to die reflects contradictions that intermingle, the “hollow / munched tooth of a second” is an exaggerated representation of the “endless stillness” she talks about in “Did I go mad in my mother’s womb” (5-6, 14). To wait on the “hollow / munched tooth of a second” is an absurd and almost darkly comical representation of the colloquial saying “waiting on pins and needles.” The waiting is painful, as painful as being stuck on the sharp, jagged edge of a tooth. This is metaphorical, to be sure, but it is also a ludicrous exaggeration for the sake of emphasis. The image of a fetus waiting on the edge of sharp tooth, waiting to die on the “munched tooth of a second” reflects the absurdity of her life. Her reality is

reflected in the image of a tooth that has been “munched,” chewed on, and left jagged and damaged. Later in the poem, Cowen writes that “The floor never picks itself / up and walks away” (9-10). What is established stays established because our social structures reinforce themselves. Her own situation is as hopeless and absurd as the possibility of the floor walking away. It has never done so before and the likelihood of it happening now is slim. Further, she sees herself as someone who is figuratively walked on and stepped on who is powerless to leave. She sees herself just as stuck in her place as the floor that others walk on. Cowen is saying that there is no use in trying to trying to “pick up” and change traditions and ways of life that have been firmly established over time. These things will not change; they will not move. She can critique the establishment by reflecting its harsh realities, but she feels she can’t change it. If this is the reality that waits for her outside of her mother’s womb, it’s no wonder she would overturn reader expectation by waiting to die instead of waiting to be born.

As the poem goes on, it also speaks to the pressures of being female and performing her gender in her rigid world, ending with a grotesque reflection of performance.

I

wants a little something for itself

unique, a single word

treasure

act

perfection

If only to give away

Only to “He scatters

his blood on the street.” (34-42)

The last two lines of this section reflect the grotesque through exaggeration. One would need to lose an exorbitant amount of blood to be able to scatter blood on the streets. This image is not only an exaggeration for emphasis, but it is also disgusting. One pictures a bloodbath, and thus the reflection of a truly tortured reality. The first few lines here establish the reality of female performance before we get the grotesque image of blood being scattered on the streets. The speaker here is saying that she wants to want something “for itself” (35). She doesn’t desire something for *herself*, but for *itself*, for the sake of the object in question. The next few lines are very complex: “unique, a single word / treasure / act / perfection” (37-39). It seems that the three words listed together (treasure, act, and perfection) serve to describe the single thing that she wants “for itself.” She desires “treasure” for itself. She desires to “act” simply for the sake of acting, once again, for the sake of moving and avoiding stasis, and she desires “perfection” because to be perfect, to always “act” perfectly, would be the ultimate “treasure.” And if we continue to read He as a masculine representation of poetry itself, then these words, these things she desires, are “given away” in her poetry, in a bloody and disgusting way. She reveals her imperfections in her poetry. She reveals the stasis and inaction in her life. Through her confession, she gives away that which she most desires “for itself” (35) and He (her poetry) scatters

blood on the street. In attempting to critique and subvert female performance through poetry, her poetry kills her and makes a grotesque spectacle of her pain by scattering blood on the streets. Here, through the use of exaggeration, her poetry reflects that which is death-affirming and absurd. Even if she is her only intended audience, putting her life and her pain down on paper is an act of public performance and public self-mutilation.

For Cowen, as contradictory as this sounds, “life” as she knew it was destructive to her soul. Her poetry shows much by way of conflicted feelings and oppositional emotions. Cowen tellingly describes death, for example, as a friendly figure in her poem “Death I’m Coming,” which begins with the lines:

Death I’m coming

Wait for me

I know you’ll be

at the subway station

loaded with galoshes, raincoat, umbrella, babushka (1-5)

Here Cowen again establishes a particular mundane reality—the subway station—and disrupts that ordinary setting with an other-worldly, death-affirming image. The conflicts in her life are varied: between life and death, performance and resistance, social expectations and expression of personal desires. And sometimes the grotesque works to contradict or shift the reader’s expectation. In personifying Death as a figure who waits for her at the subway station, Cowen again clashes opposing images. The figure that logically would be waiting for her “with galoshes, raincoat, umbrella,

babushka” would traditionally be a mother figure. Instead, we have Death personified, a death-affirming figure acting in the traditionally life-affirming role of mother. One almost pictures the Grim Reaper standing at the subway station carrying these things, which not only reflects a clash of opposites, but also the sort of dark humor and absurdity Thomson describes in The Grotesque. Death is presented as a woman who can protect Cowen from the elements of this world, as she comes prepared with her “galoshes, raincoat, umbrella, babushka” (5). Death meets Cowen at the subway station, a location that represents the transition from one place to another, ready to offer Cowen the safety and security she has lacked in life. Ordinarily, one would try to avoid death, not seek it out as a safe haven. Cowen demonstrates that she does not fear death and embrace life, but she instead reverses this paradigm; she fears life and embraces death.

Cowen really does all she can to exaggerate the motherly in Death, a ludicrous representation of the Grim Reaper. Cowen clearly personifies Death as a woman later in the poem when she uses the female pronoun in describing Death: “Listen to what she said / ‘There’s a passage through the white cabbages’ / High and laughing through 3 hours” (9-11). This woman, Death incarnate, is not only fun, shown “High and laughing,” but she offers Cowen a death-affirming alternative to a world of chaos, disorder, and oppression. Death offers her the promise of escape from the inner tension and turmoil that occurs when one is made of “death and water.” Death shows

her a world that is as peaceful and ordered as an aisle of “white cabbages”<sup>28</sup> (10). In death, “stillness” is natural and peaceful (like a row of cabbages), it is not an oppressive force placed upon her by the outside world as it is in “Did I go mad in my mother’s womb.” The fact that the cabbages are in a row does imply that they’ve been cultivated and farmed by humans, though. This may indicate Cowen’s recognition that for Death to arrive quickly, she may need the help of a human hand. Allowing death to simply come for her when it is “her time” may mean too much waiting. Either way, the stillness and calm that would come from Death is welcoming, not frightening.

Death, as she is presented in this poem, is called “Real, that is, / Literal/ enough” (15-17). Thus, Cowen tells us that this absurd figure waiting for her at the subway station is not a metaphor. She is a literal entity. This motherly, nurturing, personified version of Death is real to her. Later in the poem, Death is said to be as “Real as the worn green / hideabed I brood on” (26-27). It doesn’t get much more mundane than a worn green hideabed. Note that Death is not dull, but she is as “real” as the dull details of everyday life, even though she is herself an other-worldly figure. But like the routines of daily life, Death is one thing Cowen can count on and wait for. However, Death is an “Incorruptible institution” (8) as opposed to the corruptible and illusory institutions we are called to count on in life. Death is a welcoming figure,

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<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that the image of a passage of white cabbages resonates with the labyrinth in Pan’s Labyrinth. Labyrinths are typically symbols for the winding path of life. What differentiates a labyrinth from a maze is that a labyrinth has only one fixed path with only one possible outcome while a maze has more than one route to the end. A labyrinth is very clearly, then, a metaphor for life with the one fixed outcome, the one possible result: Death, who is waiting “openarmed at the passage end” (30).

waiting for Cowen, “openarmed at the passage end” (30). One would not normally view Death as a welcoming figure, especially at Cowen’s young age, but these disparate ideas—Death as welcoming and inviting, life as scary and excruciating—are brought together to reflect how horrifying Cowen’s reality is. Death is a fun and welcomed relief by comparison.

What is startling about this poem is the dark turn it takes at the end. All along, Death has been portrayed in traditional feminine, motherly, and inviting tones, reflecting both the absurd and a comingling of disparate images—a motherly (life-affirming image) Grim Reaper (death-affirming image). The final two lines, however, tell us that Death “Waits for no one / Not even you” (34-35). This juxtaposes the opening two lines of the poem where Cowen implores Death that she is “coming / Wait for me” (1-2). Though Death in this absurd representation kindly and generously brings “the homeless” (31) home and gives the wanderers “a snoozing place among thick visions” (18), the truth is that Death does all these things on Her time. That is the “single simple answer” (6). However, just as cabbages can be peacefully placed in an orderly row by human interference, the “single simple answer” of when one dies can also be altered by human interference, as Cowen quite literally demonstrated with her own life. Her poetry speaks not only of the artifice of life, but the draw of sacrificing one’s life for a much more appealing alternative.

**Rey:** *Derramasteis vuestra sangre antes que la de un inocente. Esa era la última prueba.*

*Fauno: Y habéis elegido bien, Majestad.*<sup>29</sup>

As a final illustration of Cowen's views on death, the existing social order, and her use of the grotesque in illustrating the absurdity of reality, "I took the skin of corpses" is an exemplary poem. Throughout it, Cowen struggles to define herself and find her place in a world whose regulations and structures have long been established. The speaker tries to take body parts from "corpses" and create an identity that is her own, but she continuously fails in her attempts. This is an example of opposing forces comingling, as she is taking from death in trying to create a life, a sense of identity, for herself. It is also representative of ludicrous and disgusting exaggeration, as taking the skin, hair, ears, eyes, and genitalia of corpses, among other disgusting images, is a ludicrous reflection of what happens when we take on our roles in social performance. It is, therefore, a grotesque reflection of her reality:

I took the skin of corpses  
 And dyed them blue for dreams  
 Oh I can wear these everywhere  
 (I sat home in my jeans).  
  
 I cut the hair of corpses  
 And wove myself a wreath  
 Finer than silk or wool I thought

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<sup>29</sup> **King:** It was your blood and not that of an innocent that made you worthy of the throne. It was the last task. The most important one.

**Faun:** And you chose well, Your Highness.

And shivered underneath

I cut the ears of corpses

To make myself a hood—

Warmer than forget-me-nots

I paid for that in blood.

I robbed the eyes of corpses

So I could face the sun

But all the days had cloudy skies

And I had lost my own.

From the sex of corpses

I sewed a union suit

Esther, Solomon, God himself

Were humbler than my cock.

I took the thoughts of corpses

To buy my daily needs

But all the good in all the stores

Were neatly labeled Me.

I borrowed heads of corpses

To do my reading by

I found my name on every page

And every word a lie.

Now when I meet the spirits

In who's [sic] tappings I am jailed

They buy me wine or read a book

No one can make my bail

When I become a spirit

(I'll have to wait for life)

I'll sell my deadly body

To the student doctor's knife. (1-36)

Cowen paints a bleak picture of trying to fit into the established social order. The corpses are the dead bodies and they are meant to reflect the outdated mores and norms that she can't quite make herself follow correctly. It is grotesque to think of dying the skin of corpses so that she might put them on and wear them, or sewing clothing out of the sex of corpses. This is both disgusting and absurd. To go back to Butler's clothing metaphor, she tries them on for size, but they never seem to fit. Taking from corpses to build and shape her socially acceptable identity, to fit the "rules," is a macabre reflection of the existing social order. Performing identity is always, on some level, a performance created by those who came before and established the "rules" of gender, culture, and the general public. This poem uses grotesque imagery to reflect the ways in which social constructs like gender are established rules and constructs because they are performed and repeated over time.

Dead customs and costumes have a powerful hold over us that reaffirm themselves with each new live performance, reflecting once again how the dead and the living coexist in this grotesque reality. This isn't just dead customs and mores, but dead bodies reflecting the dead customs and mores. A living person takes apart a dead body as a reflection of social performance.

Cowen tries to look the way she's told she's supposed to, trying on the skin and hair of corpses (1,5), but she ends up reverting back to her "jeans" or "shiver[ing]" in the cold reality of it (4, 8). She tries to see and hear what she's supposed to, using the ears and eyes of corpses (9,13), but putting on the hood made of the ears she stole from corpses, and facing the sun with the eyes she stole from corpses, only results in the loss of her self. When she tries to think the way she's "supposed" to, borrowing the "thoughts" and "heads" of corpses (21, 25), she finds that she's selling herself out or living a lie, finding the goods in "all the stores / Were neatly labeled Me" and finding her name "on every page / And every word a lie" (23-24, 27-28). The spirits she encounters are the artists and poets she calls her friends, who will "buy [her] wine or read a book" but who are really incapable of helping her escape her prison (31). The grotesque distortion of reality she presents in this poem—the living being forced to take apart the dead— illustrates how Cowen is trapped in her reality. In this reality, she is surrounded by corpses and spirits, but no human beings like herself. She is alone, reflecting the estrangement she feels from her

reality. This poem really speaks to her sense of isolation.<sup>30</sup> She doesn't feel liberated when she meets the free spirits of the Beat Generation because they simply remind her of the sort of freedom that she will never know. In her grotesque world, where putting on the body parts of corpses is not a performance she can pull off, it becomes clear that she will only know the kind of freedom she seeks in death.

The one verse paragraph that seems to challenge the reading that corpses offer a grotesque reflection of gender performativity is the fifth one where our speaker takes the "sex" of corpses (17). It would seem that making herself a "cock" from the sex of corpses contradicts the notion that the corpses reflect dead gender performances that are repeated over time (20). After all, creating a "cock" for herself is not in line with outdated mores and norms for a woman. However, this verse paragraph serves as an example of our speaker using the grotesque not just as a reflection, but as an attempt to subvert outdated mores. Notice that she sews a "union suit" from the sex of corpses (18). A union suit is a type of long underwear, worn by both men and women. The word "union" also implies a union of the two sexes in her new creation, which is confirmed when in the next line she compares herself to "Esther, Solomon, and God" (19). From the sex of corpses, she unites male and female. She takes from both to create a "union" suit. As a woman, she does not have male genitalia, but she attempts to create a new identity for herself that gives her a "cock" that even humbles "God himself" (19). But even in subverting traditional

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<sup>30</sup> The grammatical error and possible misspelling also lead the reader to question whether this piece was intended for public viewing. "Who's" [line 30] should obviously be "whose." And what are "tappings" and how have they jailed her? Perhaps she is speaking of a rhythmic pattern, being jailed by monotony. Perhaps the "r" is missing from the word "trappings."

notions of femininity, she still relies on “corpses,” she is still sewing her clothing from the parts of dead bodies. So in constructing a new sexual identity, all she has is old constructions of gender performance, male and female.

Much of Elise Cowen’s poetry can be characterized by its grotesque undertones. She clearly felt trapped by the roles placed on her. She did not feel that she belonged in her predetermined role of “Lady” and all the baggage that went along with that role (heterosexual, docile, pretty, etc). Though she did not see herself as a poet or an artist, she had an awareness of the world around her that was deeper than that of the average person. Though it largely reflects her particular reality, her poetry shows an awareness of human suffering and the human condition that clearly affected her worldview. It touches on theories of gender, sexuality, and performativity that are decades ahead of her time. That which critics like Danow and Thomson present as the other side of magical realism—the grotesque—is used to critique and reflect the social structures that would imprison Cowen in life. Her life and her poetry were brimming with tension between opposing forces: light and dark, life and death, social performance and free will. Cowen’s poetry explored the tension between these opposing forces and the grotesque exaggerations and absurd reflections that dwell between them. As Thornton Wilder wrote in Our Town: “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? —every, every minute? [...] The saints and poets, maybe—they do some” (100). Elise Cowen “realized” and reflected the darker and more troubling sides of her life, and by extension, the lives of anyone who lived in

worlds brimming with tension and conflict. She had the eyes to see. Despite her own doubts, Cowen was a poet.

IV. Loba: Decentering Patriarchy and Reconstructing the Feminine through Magick

*Ofelia: Soy – la princesa Moanna – Y no te tengo miedo –*<sup>31</sup>



“A woman who writes has power. A woman with power is feared. The world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. Writing is the most daring thing I’ve ever done and the most dangerous.”—Gloria Anzaldúa

Thus far in this dissertation, characters have used magical elements within their realities to protest, reflect, or subvert hegemonic forces within their “real” worlds. In Loba, di Prima uses magical realism, specifically the willful creation and use of magick, as a tool to recreate, re-imagine, and re-represent the roles of women in our cultural and literary history. Thus magick becomes a tool to reflect the way our social fabric has been male-dominated and to resist those forces by giving women

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<sup>31</sup> **Ofelia:** I am—the Princess Moanna—and I am not afraid of you.

who have traditionally been silent and powerless voices to speak of their lives and tell their stories. Di Prima creates a symbiotic relationship between the Loba goddess, the women in her poem, and herself. Di Prima willfully created Loba, and the Loba in turn breathes life and light onto the bones and remains of once dead women, transforming them and giving them new life. Through magick, the Loba goddess can gather up the unacknowledged, forgotten, and devalued parts of the self, and create from the splintered pieces, a whole self, a new creation. Di Prima is a writer with the eyes to see, giving us the forgotten and ignored perspectives of many silenced women in history and literature. The Loba, then, magickally merges oppositional worlds—life and death<sup>32</sup>—and with her transformative powers, moves beyond such binaries and into the realm of multiplicity.

One of the characteristics of magical realism is that it draws from ancient myths and folklore in creating its magically real worlds. Di Prima does this with the myth of *La Loba*. Traditionally, *La Loba* is known to collect the bones of animals and creatures left for dead, sing over them, and slowly bring them back to life. “*La Loba* sings over bones she has gathered,” explains Clarissa Pinkola Estés, author of Women Who Run with the Wolves. “To sing means to use the soul-voice. It means to say on the breath the truth of one’s power and one’s need” (26). The Loba is a champion for women. She *is* women.

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<sup>32</sup> Much of the Loba mythology is in line not just with the characteristics of magical realism, but with the characteristics of the grotesque, as well. Within this myth exists the intersections of life and death, preservation and extinction. Plus, the regeneration of life at the hands of the Loba, though beautiful, might be constructed as grotesque.

Through the *Loba*, di Prima gathers female archetypes and reimagines them. Loba magickally sings over the women within its pages and gives them new life. In Part 12 of Loba, this re-construction and regeneration of once dead and broken pieces is described in this way:

stubs of horns  
 snout  
 huge eyes of  
 lemurs  
 their language  
 geometry     these  
 we re-member  
 re-collect (227)

Described above are creatures that have been dismembered, torn apart and left for dead. In remembering them, she re-members them, or puts them back together. The fact that language is “geometry” is telling too, as geometry is a mathematical construct dealing with questions of shape, size, and relative position. This statement seems to indicate that words do have the power to reconstruct that which has been dismembered. Language is about imagining the answers to geometrical questions of size, shape, and position, and then putting broken pieces back together.

Dianna di Prima speaks quite a bit about the importance of “magick” in her life and her writing. She mentions the role of magick in her life a few times in her memoir Recollections of My Life as a Woman (2001):

Magick has to do with the relation of light and time. Bending them. Light and time and the movement of the mind. That simple.

It was magick I had found, in the dark. [...] Some way to play with reality, bend it to your will. Neither space nor time so solid as we had been told. (83)

I look at magick as a variation on magical realism. It meets many of the characteristics of magical realism and performs the same function in Loba as magical realism generally performs in literature: it uses unreal elements to subvert and challenge our concept of reality. The “K” at the end of the word differentiates this “bending” of light and time from other types of magic. Magick has more to do with will over accident, with someone or something causing miracles to occur by willfully manipulating the laws of the universe. Magick has ties to religion, spirituality, and the occult. Hans Holzer, author of Witches, describes the difference this way: “Magic is tantamount to make-believe, thence to phony, artificial, clever, and tricky—but untrue” (260). Magick, on the other hand, is very different: “to ‘make magick’ means to set forces in motion” (260). Obviously, Holzer and I define magic differently, as magic has been a real and ever-present entity in the texts I’ve examined in this dissertation thus far. The difference is that magic *exists* in reality, while magick is *created* within reality. Magick has been used to describe paranormal phenomena or occult traditions, but is in its most basic sense a description of “normal” people causing amazing things to occur. This notion of finding the miraculous in the mundane ties magick to magical realism. Where magick differs most greatly from

magical realism is in its intentionality. Magick has to do with motivation, spirit, and desire.

This distinction perhaps makes magick more of a deviation from traditional magical realist themes than the grotesque, which was discussed in the previous chapter. One of the characteristics of magical realism is that the magic within magical realism has no explanation; it merely *is*. So magick, the willful creation of magical events, seems like a huge departure from magical realism. However, the magick that exists in Loba has very real ties to the characteristics found in both magical realism and the grotesque. For instance, readers of Loba will be torn between two conflicting realities, or two contradictory accounts of the same events. Readers may feel that they are reading about a space that exists between realities, or that conflicting realities are informing one another. Readers are forced to question traditional notions of time and space. Loba draws upon ancient mythologies and religions. And, perhaps most importantly, Loba uses magic (or magick) to critique and subvert the existing social order. Like magical realism, magick is something that is not seen or understood by all. Some have the eyes to see it, and others do not. Basically, just as Pan's Labyrinth has characters that exist in a world that seamlessly blends the magical and the ordinary (the fairies and the faun exist in Ofelia's world and she treats them as though they are commonplace) and yet Ofelia can still willfully create magic and bend the will of the universe (she can eat the grapes that cause the monster to wake up; she can write on walls with chalk and open doors that aren't there), so too can Loba capture a

world that is both an example of magical realism, and a variation on that theme with the Loba's willful creation of magick.

The Loba's magick merges opposing forces together—life and death, real and unreal, light and dark. In bringing together seemingly dichotomous forces, the Loba re-constructs the opposing pieces and creates something new. Much of the re-construction that the poem seeks to do becomes evident before Book One of Loba technically even begins. In “Ave,” the opening section, which literally means hail or praise, di Prima presents several images of what it means to be a woman with an incantatory power, treating these representations of women with religious solemnity. The bridging together of opposing forces is very apparent in “Ave,” as di Prima juxtaposes these elements from one line to the next:

you lie with the unicorn  
 you lie with the cobra  
 you lie in the dry grass  
 you lie with the yeti [...]  
 you tower above me  
 you are small  
 you cower on hillsides  
 out of the winds (4)

Some of these images could represent the cultural differences embodied within this woman who is being praised. In di Prima's revisionist mythmaking, the Loba creates a world where differences are not hidden or shameful, nor are they used to create

boundaries and walls. The unicorn brings to mind the royal coat of arms for the United Kingdom, while the cobra makes the reader think of Indian snake-charmers. Of course, the disparity between the unicorn and the cobra presents more than cultural differences. The woman represented in these lines lies with a being as magical and beautiful as a unicorn and with one as real and as deadly as a cobra, reflecting the sort of conflict and tension that exists within the woman represented here: “life-and-death,” unicorns and cobras.

The next two lines reverse the order of danger, lest one assume that the “unreal” is always safe and the “real” is always dangerous. She both lies on dry grass (dead and real, but mundane and harmless) and with a yeti, (magical and alive, but cold and monstrous). Further, this woman paradoxically both towers and is small. In regards to a woman’s place in society, this comparison calls to mind what bell hooks suggests about a woman’s positions of power in our current social structures. She either towers over others (suggesting a dominant form of power, one that is at the expense of the powerless), or she is small (the woman who is constructed as powerless, the one who is towered over). But there is more to these contrasting representations than the simple conclusion that the woman being praised here is “every woman.” These dualistic identities exist within her, as they exist *within* every woman. Di Prima offers a revisioning and reinterpretation of what it means to be a woman in our culture. Rather than allow differences to become barriers, the Loba celebrates the contrasting identities that she has united. “Ave,” the beginning incantation, ends with the following words:

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

*ay-a*

*ay-a ah*

*ay-a*

*ay-a ah ah*

*maya ma maya ma*

*om star mother ma om*

*maya ma ah*

The invocation here speaks to the Loba's ability to elevate women in a world that so often degrades them. Her "moon sisters" are often voiceless, disempowered, and misunderstood. When there is nothing to them, the Loba magickally and literally sings them back to life.

Di Prima uses the Loba, or wolf goddess, to speak for the voiceless and to give them voices with which to speak. She uses the power of magick to overthrow many of the established patriarchal ideas which have permeated western thought. In the poem itself, magick is described as having the "power" to "open what is shut and / Shut what is open" (43). The Loba's purpose, in her traditional myth and in di

Prima's poem, is to gather, collect, restore, and preserve. Di Prima takes the stories of many women, women who have been celebrated in our culture and women who have been damned, and she reconstructs and reimagines them. According to Audrey M. Clark, a critic who wrote a review of Loba when it was re-released in 1998:

In traditional mythology, The Loba is labeled as bone-gatherer and re-creator. The Loba's sole purpose is to collect and preserve, especially that which is in danger of being lost in the world. [...] In many ways, Loba can be read as an autobiographical account of di Prima's struggle to make her voice heard in a generation that was mostly male. But, in a larger sense, Loba also represents the voices of all women. (Clark)

Even though the concept of the “mother tongue” as it was presented in the second-wave feminist movement<sup>33</sup> has largely been rejected in contemporary feminist circles, di Prima's Loba attempts to use the mother tongue in new ways. It is not a new language outside of male patriarchal constructions, because such a language would be impossible. Instead, Loba attempts to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. Di Prima uses patriarchal myths, legends, languages, and histories in creating a more inclusive and female-centered discourse. She not only dismantles the master's house, but then also builds and creates new structures of existence. Loba

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<sup>33</sup> By most accounts, feminism can be broken up into three “waves.” The first wave spans from the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. Most feminists mark the end of the first wave with women in the United States getting the right to vote in 1920. The second wave spans from the 1960s to the 1980s. The third wave started in the 1990s. Lee Ann Banaszak, in The US Women's Movement in Global Perspective (2005), distinguishes between the second and third wave primarily in their shifts in focus: The second wave distinguishes itself from previous movements of the Left that they see as male-dominated; the third wave distinguishes itself from previous women's movements that they see as white-dominated, sex-phobic, and promoting an essential model of gender.

takes traditional patriarchal stories and legends and subverts them through the use of female-centered magick and a decidedly female point of view.

But does a “mother tongue” truly exist?<sup>34</sup> Is there—or can there be— a specifically female language that exists outside of the male-dominated and male-oriented language of patriarchy? Jane Tompkins, in her 1989 essay “Me and My Shadow,” attempts to disrupt patriarchal expectations of criticism by writing in what she calls “the mother tongues,” or a feminist approach to language that is accessible, concrete, and somehow not derivative of male language. In Tompkins’s estimation, the father tongue, the sort of language traditionally used in academic discourse, is “distancing—making a gap, a space between the subject of self and the object of other. [...] The father tongue is spoken from above. It goes one way. No answer is expected or heard” (29). The mother tongue, on the other hand, expects an answer. It is an ongoing and inclusive conversation. “Its power is not in dividing, but binding” (29), just like the Loba’s power.

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<sup>34</sup> One of the most hotly debated issues in feminist theory and scholarship during the second wave of feminism was the existence (or lack thereof) of an authentic feminist discourse. In 1988, Linda Alcoff explored the feminist identity crisis that seemed to be emerging at the time due to what was quickly becoming *competing* feminisms in her article “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory.” This article points out that in attempting to speak for women, feminism often presupposes knowledge of what women truly are, but that every source of knowledge about women has been contaminated by misogyny and sexism. Post-structuralists claim that both feminist and misogynist attempts to define women are politically reactionary and wrong, that the concept of woman is fiction, and that feminist efforts should work toward dismantling that fiction. Cultural feminists, on the other hand, believe that the problem is the way women are described by men, by a group with a contrasting point of view and set interests apart from the interests of women. Cultural feminists believe that *womanhood*, and all that womanhood entails in terms of identity formation, is and should be a primary constituent of female identity and the source of a female essence. They would argue for the existence of and importance of a mother tongue.

The feminist approach to writing and language is not mere communication, but language as relationship, as having the power to connect people. This idea of the mother tongue providing a female connection in and through language is a part of the magick performed in Loba. When paired with the Loba goddess, after all, silent women become transformed and recover their voices. This relationship heals them; it brings them back to life. In Loba, di Prima quotes an “imaginary Jungian scholar” in describing the “myth of mother and daughter:”

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

The mother tongue is like magical realism in that it is dialogic and conversational, unlike colonial writing which is monologic and didactic. As Zamora and Faris point out in their introduction to Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, “realism intends its version of the world as a singular version, as an objective (hence universal) representation of natural and social realities—in short that realism functions ideologically and hegemonically” (3). Magical realism, on the other hand, recognizes that a dichotomy need not exist between magic and reality, and so while magical realist texts may still be ideological, they are certainly not hegemonic in their

ideologies. They “create space for interactions of diversity” (3) thus by nature making them more conversational and more in tune with the concept of a mother tongue.

Of course much has changed in feminist theory since Tompkins wrote “Me and My Shadow” in 1989. In the 1970’s and 1980’s, there was much discussion in the feminist movement about this supposed split between the “rational” (read: male) and the “emotional” (read: female), but in the so-called third-wave of the 1990’s, most had decided that feminism needed to explore the possibility of a theory of the gendered subject that did not slide into essentialism. The very subjectivity and identity of woman and man, rational and emotional, is, after all, constructed. Another example of the evolution of feminist thought away from notions of a split identity is The Bridge We Call Home (2002), a follow up to the hugely popular and hugely influential This Bridge Called My Back (1981), which has become a model of sorts for how women of color don’t theorize in “white” academic ways. This Bridge We Call Home includes many theoretical and scholarly essays, which is a departure from the previous text. Texts like This Bridge We Call Home challenge the notion that academic theory and criticism is automatically white or male, illustrating that perhaps Audre Lorde was wrong when she declared that “The Master’s Tools” would “Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” It is possible to use master’s tools without becoming assimilated, appropriated, or somehow destroyed by using them.

Part of the key in displacing and dismantling the Master’s house is to take up the task that Tompkins calls for in “Me and My Shadow,” to take one’s thinking beyond simple “revolution” and into a new kind of thinking, an “evolution” of

thought. It is precisely this evolution of thought that Diane di Prima presents in Loba. Part of that unique vision is expressed through the use of magick and revisionist mythmaking. Di Prima presents feminist revisions of traditional myths and stories. The stories might not change, but the women within them do. As Helen of Troy says in her revisionist myth from Book Five of Loba, women are invited and encouraged to “*wield the power of the flame / against the flame*” (79), to use the master’s tools against him.

In “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,” Alicia Ostriker argues that “the idea of revisionist mythmaking in women’s poetry may offer us one significant means of redefining ourselves and consequently our culture” (71). Revisionist mythmaking differs, then from other types of mythmaking and folklore in that it redefines a culture, while traditional mythmaking and local lore usually serve to define a culture or some aspect of a culture. Ostriker points out that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, male and female poets have employed revisionist mythmaking in their poetry. However, she also points out that the ways in which H.D. and Sexton revise myths is very different from the ways in which Yeats, Pound, and Eliot do. The early male modernists employ myths as “a means of defying their culture’s rationalism and materialism” (73). And while the women poets of the period also had a particular disdain for and distrust in these things, “they do not share the Modernist nostalgia for a golden age of past culture” (73). However, just as there are differences between the ways male and female modernist poets employed myths and revisionist mythmaking into their poetry, I would argue that just a few years down the line, di

Prima practices mythmaking differently than even the women discussed in “The Thieves of Language.” The Ave section of Loba signals to the reader that this is not just revisionist mythmaking, but it is more in line with the sorts of incantations Anzaldúa writes about *Borderlands/ La Frontera*. It’s shamanistic. It’s spiritual. It’s more than poetry, it’s a religious chant. That initial incantation and the beginning of Loba signals to the reader this poem does more than rewrite and revise old myths; it brings the dead back to life.

According to The Study of American Folklore (1968), “Generally speaking, then, folklore may be defined as those materials in culture that circulate traditionally among members of any group in different versions, whether in oral form or by means of customary example” (5). Most scholars associate five qualities with “true” folklore: “(1) it is oral; (2) it is traditional; (3) it exists in different versions; (4) it is usually anonymous; (5) it tends to be formularized” (4). While Loba draws upon myths, mythmaking, and folklore, di Prima is revisionist in her text in that she allows the Loba to breathe new lives into these myths. She makes the real and the remarkable collide in such a way that forces the reader to rethink tradition rather than reinforce it the way traditional myths do.

As Anthony Libby says of di Prima in “Diane di Prima: ‘Nothing is Lost; It Shines in Our Eyes,’” “Di Prima was one of the heroic precursors of second-wave feminism, and her poetry achieved its own unique vision” (46). Di Prima participated in the Beat Movement very early on and published her first book of poetry, This Kind of Bird Flies Backward, in 1958. The Beat Generation was very much a male-

dominated clique of artists and writers as di Prima herself notes in Recollections of my Life as a Woman: “I realize that there truly was this determinedly male community of writers around me in the 50s” (107). But di Prima made herself at home in this circle. Other women at the time, like Hettie Jones and Joyce Johnson, for example, have spoken of having the desire to write and create, but putting their own desires on hold while they supported the talented men in their lives.

Di Prima refused to put her own dreams on hold. As she says in Memoirs of a Beatnik (1969), she had read Ginsberg’s Howl and felt a kinship with these people whom Ginsberg described as “the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness.” She recalls that “Allen and his gang were in New York and I was eager to meet them” (180). She didn’t second-guess her own abilities and talents and she didn’t second-guess her place in their circle. As she told Anne Waldman in a 1980 interview:

Don’t forget, however great your visioning and your inspiration, you need the techniques of the craft and there’s nowhere, really, to get them because these are not passed on in schools. They are passed on person to person, and back then the male naturally passed them on to the male. I think maybe I was one of the first women to break through that in having deep conversations with Charles Olson and Frank O’Hara. (Knight 124)

She simply made her way and shared her voice in the midst of the “boys’ club;” however, she also belonged ideologically to the second-wave feminist movement and

continued writing into the third. In Loba, she creates a space where women can pass on “technique” and “craft” from woman to woman, the sort of reality she did not know in her life.

Both magick and her sense of what it means to be a woman in our culture are very important to di Prima’s writing and her identity as a writer. In the early 1970’s, as di Prima was beginning to imagine and write Loba, she was also giving classes for the NEA’s poetry-in-the-schools program. She was teaching writing in prisons and reform schools, as well as offering workshops on writing and visualization. In the 1980’s, she helped found the Masters Program in Poetics at the New College of California in San Francisco and has taught several courses there on the occult and Hermetic traditions in poetry (Knight 127). Di Prima clearly views poetry as an influential tool for social change. It has power. Our poetics, like magick, can cause change to happen. In “Rant,” she describes the power of poetry in this way:

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

There is no way out of the spiritual battle  
 the war is the war against the imagination  
 you can’t sign up as a conscientious objector  
  
 the war of the worlds hangs here, right now, in the balance

it is a war for this world, to keep it  
a vale of soul-making

the taste in all our mouths is the taste of our power  
and it is bitter as death (Pieces of a Song 159)

In di Prima's view, what we do with the tools we have, what we do with our words and actions, can have real consequences.

In a 2002 interview with Joseph Matheny of Literary Kicks, Di Prima discussed what she hoped to see in the future for poetry and literature: "I would like to see authors really use Magick to reach themes. I'd like to see more work coming out of visioning and trance. I'm really tired of reading about human beings, I'd like to see a real dimensional jump."<sup>35</sup> In Borderlands, La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa expresses a similar desire in hoping to see a new role for literature:

In the ethno-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life. The religious, social and aesthetic purposes of art were all intertwined. [...] The ability of a story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman. [...]

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<sup>35</sup> In Recollections of My Life as a Woman, di Prima says that one of the places she sought out and found magick was "in the poets." She recalls long evenings with fellow artists and poets, "Trance sessions we invented, a state between sleeping and waking [...] 'Sending' words or images across boroughs of New York, at the appointed hour of the weekday night. Checking in with each other the next day, before we read our new poems: what had we 'gotten'?" (84).

My stories are acts encapsulated in time, “enacted” every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not inert and dead objects (as aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). Instead, the work has an identity [...] The work manifests the same needs as a person; it needs to be “fed,” *la tengo que bañar y vestir*. (88-89)

Just as magical realism seamlessly blends the real and the magical, forcing the reader to explore the “in-betweenness” of life, Anzaldúa calls for a blending of the spiritual and the secular. She calls for us to explore the “all at oneness” and “In-betweenness” of life and art. This is precisely how di Prima attempts to use magick and the mother tongue in new ways in Loba. The poem is not a dead object, nor is it a monologic entity meant to speak at the reader from the safety and distance of the ivory towers above. It is a living poem, a work in progress. The Loba goddess has magickally breathed life into this poem so that it is not a dead thing, but a living and breathing thing. Di Prima includes an important “Author’s Note” at the beginning of Loba that reflects her concept of the “Mother tongues:”

*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 (xiii)*

The conversation has not ended; it is ongoing and inclusive. In allowing room for “juggling” and “recycling,” di Prima lets the poem change, evolve, and grow. This

almost humanizes or materializes her poem in interesting ways. Like constructions of femininity and evolving feminist theories, Loba, too, takes a position of being changeable and unfixed. In fact the poem has seen many different incarnations over the years. Part 1 of Loba was first published on its own in 1973, with Part 2 and “Loba as Eve” following in 1976 and 1977, respectively. Loba Parts I-VIII was first published in 1978. The most recent enhanced edition of the poem was published in 1998.

***Ofelia:** Mi nombre es Ofelia. ¿Quién eres tú?*

***Fauno:** Yo—yo he tenido tantos nombres. Nombres viejos que solo pueden pronunciar el viento y los árboles—Yo soy el monte, y el bosque, y la tierra. Soy un fauno—Vuestro más humilde de vuestros súbditos, majestad.<sup>36</sup>*

Part of Loba’s “Magick” is that in it, di Prima presents a vision of “reality” that may be a vision others cannot see or understand. In The Mysteries of Vision: Some Notes on H.D., di Prima wrote of admiring H.D. for her “willingness to speak of what cannot be proved [...] the willingness-to-speak of what perhaps only *she* can see, can reckon as ‘real’” (7, 9). The same can be said of di Prima’s vision in Loba. In The Birth of Modernism, Surette notes that “occultism holds that the revelation is preserved and handed down in written texts and in the oral traditions” and that “the wisdom (that is, the content of the revelation) is thought to be incomprehensible to all but the enlightened” (13). There is a willingness to speak of things that may not be

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<sup>36</sup> **Ofelia:** My name is Ofelia. Who are you?

**Faun:** I—I have had so many names. Old names that only the wind and the trees can pronounce. I am the mountains, and the forest, and the earth. I am a faun—your most humble servant, your Highness.

visible to all in this poem. And this ability to speak of that which cannot be proved as if it is real is precisely the sort of leap of faith required in the use of magick. Magick, like magical realism, is still grounded in reality and largely governed by the very real laws of the universe. But magick is “the application of knowledge, techniques, and skills to natural laws most men do not realize exist, or do not ordinarily know how to utilize for their benefit” (Holzer 262). It has to do with a belief in the personal authority to make things possible and the ability to harness the powers of the mind and the universe in then making things happen. In terms of feminist notions of voice and the “mother” and “father” tongues, this willfulness di Prima presents in Loba to speak of the “emotional” as “rational,” or to intermix the two, also speaks to her willingness to challenge constructions of feminine and masculine. She wants to conceive of a different notion of power and identity and she thus wills it to be so.

Beyond speaking life into what was dead and reconstructing what was broken, one thing Loba does is not only celebrate womanhood and femininity, but it also refutes traditional notions of womanhood and femininity. Loba uses ancient folklore and religions in reconstructing and reimagining “reality” as we know it, specifically reality for women. Rather than pinning down femininity into some measureable and definable thing, di Prima instead constructs a concept and a vision of womanhood with no real answers or solutions. It is in all ways illusory and in all ways magickal. In attempting to break from traditional male-centered creation myths and formations of identity, di Prima is doing what she can to speak in the controversial “mother tongues.” Magick, in this way, serves the same function as magical realism in that it

is di Prima's way of decentering privilege. Rather than present the world in a "realistic" fashion, magick allows the speaker to envision and create an alternative "reality," one that is able to correct the so-called existing reality. Di Prima chooses to write a reality into existence that embraces female-centeredness.

Loba is just as much a story of self discovery and self-actualization as it is a poem about magick. We see di Prima's female subject go through the process of naming herself and thinking for herself in this rich and textured poem. And in a way, the process of self-discovery and self-actualization is an act of magick. It is the process of willfully and purposefully creating and constructing oneself. In thinking for herself and constructing her own stories, she rejects the names that would be given to her—virgin, whore, and everything in between— and she relies instead on mythmaking and spirituality in constructing her self. The Loba calls to women, seeks them out, gives them voices, and allows them to speak. The Loba says, "I walk the long night seeking you / I climb the sea crest seeking you / calling your names" (5). The Loba provides the power to pick up the pieces of a scattered identity in order put a self together. Whether the revived woman is born in the desert, city, or country, in the Loba myth, "she is born" like Venus, "in tangled woodlands of kelp / she walks those slippery hills beneath / the waves; she rises again & again" (46).

Loba isn't myth in the sense that it isn't real or that it does not exist, but myth as the revealer of truths that aren't seen: myth as revelation. The traditional function of a myth in most cultures is to explain things are not easily understood or observed. Typically, they deal with the activities of gods and how their actions are responsible

for such natural occurrences as the changing of the seasons or even the creation of the world. Rather than trying to clarify life's mysteries, though, di Prima leaves questions unanswered and endings unresolved. The purpose of di Prima's myths is not to explain magical elements as they present themselves, but to show how magical and mysterious we really are, as women and as people.

What is being revealed, reimagined, and reconstructed in *Loba* is selfhood. In fact, though the speaker "comes of age" in this poem, she doesn't do so in the order or manner that one would expect. For instance, we see "Death & The Loba" and "The Loba Old" in Part 3, followed by "Childhood of the Loba" in Part 4. Our subject's growth is not presented in chronological order. Di Prima disorients her reader in terms of the logical progression of innocence to maturity. One of the characteristics of magical realism is that it disorients the reader, placing her within reality and yet outside of it, making her question established notions of time and space. In this new construction of reality and time, growth does not necessarily occur chronologically with age. The poem implicitly places childhood at a high state of maturity and growth, implying that as we read, we progress from "Death" to "Childhood."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Like Julia Alvarez's coming-of-age novel How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents, we don't experience the characters' growth from innocence to maturity as they age chronologically. In fact, the novel is told in reverse chronological order and from shifting points of view over the course of thirty years. The story of selfhood and self-discovery, then, is not always told chronologically, but emotionally and spiritually. Yolanda is more spiritually whole and complete in her childhood, at the end of How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents, than she is when she is in adulthood. Her life is splintered when she is uprooted and removed from the Dominican Republic as a child. In the end, she tells her reader "I am collapsing all time now so that it fits in what's left in the hollow of my story" (289). In *Loba* as in How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents, time is reconstructed, reflecting the needs and the spirit of its subject.

Like the myth and legend surrounding *La Loba*, the “Ave” section of Loba sings above women and praises them, an incantation that brings them to life, which is itself an example of magick, or the willful manipulation of the universe:

O lost moon sisters  
 crescent in hair, seas underfoot do you wander  
 in blue veil, in green leaf, in tattered shawl do you wander  
 with goldleaf skin, with flaming hair do you wander  
 on Avenue A, on Bleeker Street do you wander  
 on Rampart Street, on Fillmore Street do you wander  
 with flower wreath, with jeweled breath do you wander. (3)

In this passage, di Prima addresses women as her “moon sisters.” Many cultures have their own myths related to the moon and its connections to women. Most notably, Diana, goddess of the moon and the hunt, is known to protect female purity and virginity. On some level, by opening Loba with this incantation, di Prima places this poem as an expression of woman’s voice, like Diana, symbolically untouched and unpenetrated by men. The moon has also had historical connections with women’s menstrual cycles, and lunacy is often associated with “full moons.” It isn’t a stretch to believe that the “lost moon sisters” addressed at the beginning of this incantation are the women who have forgotten their divinity, who have believed the myths of their own lunacy or inadequacy. In offering these women hail and praise, di Prima recasts their social roles. Magickally, the *Loba*’s incantation celebrates them as new beings. Audre Lorde notes that “as women, we have been taught either to ignore our

differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than forces for change” (27). This opening is an illustration that our differences are not failings and should not be ignored, nor should they be seen as barriers that separate.

Much of the images here display di Prima’s revisionist mythmaking. The image of the “seas underfoot” calls to mind two competing religious images. The first is that of Christ walking on water, and the second is of Venus, the Goddess of Love, alluded to above, who was born out of the waves of the sea. These are, in a sense, competing images as they are drawn from competing mythologies, but they both exist within the same image, thus giving new life to both mythologies. From this point on, a duality of images is ever-present. The moon sisters wander in the marvelous and the magical, as they wander “with goldleaf skin, with flaming hair [...] with flower wreath, with jeweled breath.” And yet they also wander in the mundane, “in a tattered shawl [...] on Avenue A, on Bleecker street [...] on Rampart Street, on Fillmore Street” (3). The goldleaf skin gives the impression of both beauty and fragility. She shines and glitters, which lends itself to a positive reading of this image, but gold leaf is gold that has been beaten into extremely thin sheets, used for decoration in art and books. The image is at once beautiful and tortured.

Her flaming hair also gives the impression of beauty, color, heat, light, and energy. Yet fire can also burn and do great damage. She wears flower wreaths, which are symbols of pride and joy in many cultures, including many Roman traditions, and her breath is made of jewels. Many ancient cultures link breath to a life force. In Western tradition, God is called the breath of life and Adam is given life when God

breathes life into him. So the fact that her breath is made of jewels implies that her life holds great value and high worth. These supernatural, beautiful, and spiritual images of hair made of fire, skin made of goldleaf, and breath made of jewels contrast with the very mundane and “normal” images of “tattered clothes” and city streets. Of course, even the beautiful images contain dualities and are fraught with tension as fire is both life-giving and destructive; goldleaf is both pretty and fragile.

The dichotomy of images continues throughout the poem: “naked you walk / swathed in long robes you walk” (3), suggesting that our subject is both clothed and naked. “[Y]ou kill on steel tables / you birth on black beds” (4), presents images of the subject both having an abortion and giving birth. These are clearly opposite occurrences, yet they exist together, resisting binary thinking. The pieces come together to create wholeness.

**Ofelia:** *¿Sabes alguna nana?*

**Mercedes:** *Sólo una—pero no recuerdo la letra.*

**Ofelia:** *No importa. Quiero escucharla.*<sup>38</sup>

How much should those on the margins assimilate to the dominant culture and how much should they resist at the risk becoming isolated and “ghettoized”? In *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa discusses what it means to live on the Borderlands. As a Chicana living in the US, she is forced to straddle three cultures and value systems (the Spanish, the Indian, the Anglo) often facing inner struggles

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<sup>38</sup> **Ofelia:** Do you know a lullaby?

**Mercedes:** Only one, but I don’t remember the words.

**Ofelia:** I don’t care. I still want to hear it.

based on these cultural clashes: “Within us and within *la cultura chicana*, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack the commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture” (100). Even in terms of putting Borderlands/ La Frontera together, Anzaldúa wanted to keep her language intact and not offer translations, but at the same time she did not want readers to get too frustrated, and simply choose to not read the text at all. This process is an example of living in the Borderlands.

The solution that Anzaldúa suggests is to embrace a *mestiza* consciousness. This sparks inner change which in turn sparks social change. It also allows her to recover dignity and respect. This embracing of a type of mestiza consciousness and achieving wholeness through recovering broken pieces is also di Prima’s goal in Loba. Part 4 opens with a quotation from the Gnostic Gospel of Eve: “I have come to know myself / and have gathered myself from everywhere” (57). Further, the reader learns about constructions of self through reading the poem: “*in gathering me thou gatherest thyself*” (75). Again, some might say that the speaker in this poem is splintered, gathering parts of herself from everywhere indicating that she is broken and scattered. But she is not splintered: she may be multifaceted, but she is whole. Magick allows her to create a whole self from broken pieces. And in discovering the parts of herself that she uncovers, the reader, too, grows in knowledge and grace. Like Anzaldúa, the speaker in Loba has been taught to hate and degrade aspects of herself, but through the magick of the Loba goddess, she can come back to life, transformed and with a new understanding of herself.

In Part 4, there is a section called “Some Lies About the Loba:”

that she is eternal, that she sings

that she is star-born, that she gathers crystal

that she can be confused with Isis

that she is the goal

that she knows her name, that she swims

in the purple sky, that her fingers are pale & strong

that she is black, that she is white

that you always know who she is

when she appears

that she strides on battlemen, that she sifts

like stones in the sea

that you can hear her approach, that the jeweled feet

tread and particular measure

that there is anything about her

which cannot be said

that she relishes tombstones, falls

down marble stairs

that she is ground only, that she is not ground

that you can remember the first time you met

that she is always with you

that she can be seen without grace

that there is anything to say of her

which is not truth (62)

She is not a virgin or a whore. She is not meant to be worshipped or downtrodden. She is not an angel and she is not a witch. The Loba rejects these lies as she willfully works to speak for herself, for women. It is a lie “that she is star-born” because she is of woman born. It is a lie “that she is the goal” because she is the journey. It is a lie “that she knows her name” because she has many names that have been given to her and names she has claimed on her own. It is a lie “that she is black, that she is white” because she exists outside of dualistic thinking. It is a lie “that you always know who she is” because she is complex and resists simple definition. It is a lie “that she strides on battlemen” because she fights beside them or against them. It is a lie “that you can hear her approach” because she is stealthy. It is a lie “that she relishes in tombstones” because she celebrates life. All these lies are based on the false names and identities that have been given to her, the ones she denies and re-imagines. All of these are lies about the Loba and about women in general.

Di Prima presents a list of “lies” about the Loba which concludes with the paradoxical lie: “that there is anything to say about her / which is not truth.” This final lie puts into question everything that has come before it. How is it possible that the final lie about the Loba is that there is anything one can say about her that is not truth? This final assertion basically claims that all of the above “lies” are true. The goal in answering this question is to reach beyond paradox and into multiplicity. That

is the foundation of *mestiza* thinking. Through magick, or the willful manipulation of the world around her, multiplicity is possible. Anything is possible.

It has already been stated that part of Loba's intent is to empower women to name and create themselves out of the broken identities given to them. Part 5 of Loba draws on the notion of reconstructing femininity by re-imagining several canonical and traditional myths and stories with female centers. There are pieces in Part 5 revolving around Helen<sup>39</sup>, Lilith, and Persephone, among others. Again, part of the magick in Loba is that these dead historic, literary, and religious figures are brought back to life. Clark argues that Di Prima's main purpose in rewriting the myths surrounding these women is to refute "the roles that men and women have long accepted as truth" and to write "re-visions" of "the common patriarchal stories," creating "versions where these women triumph." While this reading of Loba is exciting and appealing, it isn't an entirely true representation of what happens in Part 5. Clark's reading romanticizes these women too much. They don't all triumph in their stories. We see Helen "wrapping the infant in my silver robe / shivering loveless.... / this is Helen's tale" (80). We see Lilith trapped in a cage as the speaker tries to set her free:

I'm biting at yr leash, I'm plotting  
a way out of yr cage, Ma Lilith,  
tunneling underground, climbing over the walls  
fasting, plotting, turning a deaf ear

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<sup>39</sup> Notably, H.D. also provided a feminist reinterpretation of Helen's story in her long poem *Helen in Egypt* (1961).

to the tunes you put me to sleep with.

Aint yr woman:

Olympia, Augusta, Eleanor

of Aquitaine, I aint: I got yr

barb in my flesh, but I'll take it

with me, to somewhere else. (90)

We see that Persephone's fate is very much the same in Loba as it is in her "common patriarchal story," as she is forced to return to Hades for the winter months:

And must I return again to that

long hell? Narrower

passages than my shoulders now

slide thru? Cold lord of definite

passion. I have just thawed

Have barely tasted fruit I brought to ripeness:

The pomegranate & persimmon ripe

just as I leave. I go. (94)

The difference between di Prima's version of these myths and the "common patriarchal" versions of them is that in Loba, the stories may be the same, but the women are different. In the "common patriarchal" version of Helen's story, we only know of her as being pretty, as having a face that sparked war and launched a thousand ships. The Loba gives Helen a new life where she was once dead. She is still pretty, and her face still decorates walls, but the "Helen on the wall" is "not real"

(79). The real Helen is the one who shivers, the one who is loveless, the one who has the power within her to “draw the dawn,” to “rip it bloody from the laboring earth” (80). The dawning of a new day is laborious for her. The entire earth screams in the aftermath of a war for which she is blamed. However, the Loba, through magick, has changed Helen. She knows herself now and she knows there is more to her story than the face that hangs on the wall. “SING ME / AGAIN to your children,” she screams. “[F]ill their ears w/ my praise” (80). She does more here than tell her story and tell of her pain. She tells her story and then asks that she be remembered. She, like the women in “Ave” has found that she deserves to be celebrated for who she is.

Lilith, whose story differs somewhat from culture to culture, is generally known as Adam’s first wife who refused to submit to his authority. Di Prima’s version of Lilith recognizes that she is often seen as a witch, a figure of evil and rebellion, as “She flies over partitions on the / wings of a bat” (85), but she is also animalized, presented as being imprisoned, held by a leash, kept in a cage. She is imprisoned by her own myth, unable to escape the implications of her story. She chose to assert herself, and society cast her as a demon. Our speaker, in trying to free her from her prison, finds that she cannot free Lilith and leave unscathed. In rescuing Lilith, she carries the “barb” always in her flesh. Wherever she goes, she carries the scars. The speaker recognizes Lilith as a mother figure (“Ma Lilith”), the one who figuratively gave birth to all women who would rebel, who would refuse to submit to male authority. But she also presents Lilith as an animal, perhaps as the Loba herself, the primitive and primal bone-gatherer, the one who would manipulate the laws of the

universe by willfully disobeying her husband, Adam, thus changing the course of human history. The speaker tells Lilith that she “promised / endless, perfect afternoons” but this promise goes unfulfilled, there are no perfect afternoons in the world they inhabit. This is the world, after all, that casts Lilith in the role of witch and demon, the world that places her in a cage. In the absence of endless, perfect afternoons, the speaker is forced to plot ways to free “Ma Lilith” from her cage. She has magickally been re-born in this poem, and she tells the reader of her humanity, a side of her identity which had been dead before the Loba brought it back to life.

Persephone clearly suffers as she descends into Hades once again, recognizing that she is returning to a “long hell” (94). She only “barely tasted the fruit” of springtime before descending the “icy staircase” into the underworld. Mysteriously, Persephone says of Hades, “My love is there” (94). Despite being tricked into a cold and hellish dwelling place, she speaks of love for the man who tricked her. Lest one see Persephone as too much of a victim, she actually triumphs as she suffers.

My love is there

Not on this softened earth.

Not in the life I quicken.

But in the bowels of night where all my warmth

Is lost in vast darkness of galactic air. (94)

Her story is one of conflicted emotions. She at once dreads going into her cold hell, but she still recognizes that her love is there. She says it is a love that “calls me home! / to icy caves where black fire shapes the walls / and ecstasy screams through

unrelenting winter” (94). Here we have contrasting images of fire and ice, ecstasy and torture, triumph and defeat. Persephone experiences love and death simultaneously.

It is overly simplistic to say that these women triumph *or* that they suffer. These women do indeed suffer, but they need not suffer in silence. They are no longer simply projected images of beauty, evil, and temperance. The Loba has raised them from the dead, magickally and willfully. They are new women; they have been given a voice and now they speak above the stereotypes that would define them. In getting to speak for themselves, in getting to tell their own complex stories, they triumph. They are women, so much more than witches and beauty queens. They are mothers and lovers and healers. They are thinkers and feelers. These are no longer dualistic ideologies, presented as male or female. Yet again, this poem resists binary thinking. In magickally putting their broken pieces and tarnished images back together, multiplicity is emphasized over division.

*Ofelia: Hace muchos, muchos años, en un país muy lógano y triste, existió una enorme montaña de piedra negra y áspera. Al caer la tarde, en la cima de esa montaña florecía todas las noches una rosa mágica que otorgaba la inmortalidad. Pero nadie se atrevía a acercarse a ella pues sus numerosas espinas estaban envenenadas. Y todos los días la rosa se marchitaba sin poder otorgar sus dones a persona alguna, porque en los hombres pesa a veces más el miedo al dolor que la promesa de la inmortalidad.*<sup>40</sup>

As well as re-visioning canonical works of fiction, Loba also takes a revisionist look at Christianity, reimagining what has become a patriarchal institution

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<sup>40</sup> **Ofelia:** A long, long time ago in a grey, sad country, there was a magic rose that made whoever plucked it immortal. But no one would dare go near it because its thorns were full of mortal poison. So amongst the men, tales of pain and death were told in hushed voices. But there was no talk of eternal life, because men fear pain more than they want immortality.

in our culture through a new female-centered point of view. Jack Foley, in his 1998 review of Loba, notes that the poem is more than a look into “the discovery of Selfhood” but also “an inquiry into the nature of the holy,” which is an inquiry taken on by many Beat writers. We’ve already seen Lilith represented in the poem, and she is certainly a figure that challenges Christianity and Christian doctrine. But there are several places in the text where traditional ideologies are challenged or subverted.

One of the things that most differentiates magick from traditional forms of magical realism is that magick has ties to religion, spirituality, and the occult. By most accounts, magical realism does not. Religion and spirituality can, after all, serve as an explanation for why miraculous things happen, especially in literature, and usually magical realism is defined as having no real explanation for why magical things occur. But there are real ties to magical realism nonetheless. Unlike other forms of faith and religion, magick and the occult are generally frowned upon by society at large, so in their very nature, they are subversive to acceptable forms of religion and worship as those things are seen and constructed in society. Leon Surette notes that magick and the occult is something that only a select few can understand and possess. “The incommunicable nature of the enlightenment justifies the label ‘occult’ and distinguishes occultism from other postclassical Western religions which, although they have mysteries or incomprehensible dogmas, do not have *secrets*” (13). The spirituality in this poem is about having the eyes to see that which others cannot: having the ability to see things from a new point of view.

In part one of Loba, di Prima tells her reader that she is constructing “a new / creation myth” (18). In a section titled “The Loba Dances,” she tells of “a new creation myth” in which The Loba “raises / in flames / the / city.” This city is described as “melting” and “flow[ing] past her” as she “sings” and “chants” amidst the “ashes” (18). The “new / creation myth” is female-centered. It is built on the traditional Loba myth, where the Loba magickally rebuilds what was once dead and gives it new life by singing over it. Yet it is similar to the creation myth in Genesis in that just as God took from earth and created Adam, The Loba takes from the ashes and creates life. However, the image of the city engulfed in flames also calls to mind Decline of the West, wherein German philosopher and historian Oswald Spengler claimed that a new civilization would eventually emerge from the ashes of this dead culture once it had collapsed or imploded on itself. This image of a new civilization rising from the ashes of burnt cities could be the magickal realization of this idyllic (from the Beat point of view) dream, where modernity and industry collapse and from them a new culture is created.

Loba utilizes magick in that the Loba goddess willfully breathes life into the ashes and creates new life. She makes magick happen; she makes change happen. This creation myth also draws on ancient mythologies and local folklore, both in that it subverts and distorts the Christian creation myth and in that it draws from the myth of *La Loba* and the Phoenix rising from the ashes. The creation of life seems to occur in a time and place that is both grounded in reality and somehow apart from reality.

This section of the poem seems to exist outside of our concepts of what the world looks like, yet it is also strangely familiar.

Later, the Loba interacts with a Christian martyr, yet again presenting an actual collision of two competing cultural points of view:

[...] Her velvet claws  
 skid on his tender skin, her fur  
 cozens his (hairless) body. He shuts  
 his eyes. He is  
 Christian martyr swooning in arena  
 transfixed eternal mystic in the desert  
 stigmata in his hands. He is  
 her stripling son, or brother, he is ancient  
 stony emperor who will  
 flay her alive. [...]

St. Sebastian

stricken by arrows she does not recognize.  
 Does he know  
 death from desire,  
 passion from immolation? Her tail  
 knocks at his sides, her growls  
 are shaking in his brain. She smiles, she  
 crouches for him, raises

her haunch. (53)

Initially, it seems as though the Loba will do the Christian martyr harm, since her claws are described as “skidding” on his “tender” skin, but her claws are “velvet claws,” and velvet has soft, soothing, sensual connotations attached to it, certainly not a connotation one would traditionally attach to claws. So the “velvet claws” that “skid on his tender skin” actually provide comfort rather than pain. She can also manipulate him—her fur “cozens” or fools him – and clothe his nakedness—her fur covers his hairless body. She has some power in this relationship. She can strike him with her claws, she can leave him naked and helpless, but she chooses to caress him rather than harm him, to clothe him in his time of need.

This section of the poem is rich with tension, the kind of tension that characterizes magical realism, itself a paradoxical concept. The Loba is putting together binaries again in revising and recreating these myths and legends. There is tension not just between two competing belief systems, but between two competing understandings of the events presented. The man interacting with The Loba is described as a “Christian martyr swooning in arena / transfixed eternal mystic in the desert / stigmata in his hands,” as “St. Sebastian / stricken by arrows” and at the same time, he is an “ancient / stony emperor who will / flay her alive.” In this description, he is in a position of power, and unlike the Loba who is gentle when she has the power to kill, he takes advantage of his power and uses it maliciously, to “flay her.” In this way, he represents traditional patriarchal and religious institutions that have killed many in the name of righteousness. But her relationship with him is

complicated, to be sure. He is at once a martyr and a killer. He is someone whom she loves and protects and someone who will do her great harm. He is in a position of vulnerability and a position of power. He is also described as a “son,” a “brother,” and a lover. The intimacy they share at the beginning of the poem is re-imagined and reflected at the end of the poem when “She smiles, she / crouches for him, raises / her haunch.” So he is not only presented as both a martyr and a killer, but also a lover and a son. The relationship the Loba has with men is a complex one. They have oppressed her and loved her, they’ve been her sons, her brothers, and her lovers, but they’ve also hurt her greatly. This section of the poem most overtly blends not just two views on spirituality, mixing Christian and Loba myths into, quite literally, one family, but also two conflicting views of male and female relationships and interactions. And in this magically real world, these relationships often exist and dwell somewhere in between power and submission, good and bad, wrong and right, somewhere beyond dualistic thinking.

Part 6 of Loba is all about re-visioning and rethinking Christian stories and myths through the eyes of one of its most iconic female participants: the Virgin Mary. Di Prima chooses to give us a glimpse at Mary’s humanity in this section of Loba. Mary, like the other women represented here, is brought back from her dead image and magickally given new life. Mary has been an icon and not a person, but the Loba has brought this once dead being to life. The fact that Mary is given a new life and a new voice when she has largely been a silent participant, an intercessor for the needs and desires of others, is in itself a magickal act.

Part 6 as a whole is called “The Seven Joys of the Virgin.” The seven joys of the Virgin is a popular traditional devotion to the events in the life of the Virgin Mary and has been used in devotional literature and art since medieval times. Di Prima takes some liberties in changing some of the seven joys for other events not usually included in the devotion, but for the most part, she stays true to the traditional events and places them in their proper order, beginning with “Annunciation” and ending with “Coronation.” When the Loba reconstructs Mary, she is allowed to be her own person, apart from the image that has been given to her as the mother of Christ. The stories have not changed, but the protagonist has. This section of Loba humanizes and individualizes Mary, reminding the reader that she was, in fact, a young, human woman when she was called to a life she did not ask for. In some senses, this section reflects the earlier “Ave” section in that Mary speaks not only for herself, but for all mothers, all children, for all people who are of woman born.

The first of the events, “Annunciation,” reveals how frightened, confused, angry, and conflicted Mary feels when she receives the revelation that she will give birth to Jesus Christ:

the tall man, towering,  
 it seemed to me  
 in anger. I was fifteen only  
 & his urgency  
 (murderous rage) an assault I  
 bent under. I saw the lilies bend

also. I had been spinning  
 flax: violet for the temple veil. I had just  
 gone to the well for water & when I returned  
 he was there. A flat stone. Towering.

Murderous rage

like the Law. They call it  
 love. His voice  
 was harsh, I bent I tried to  
 evade. (101)

The account of what happens remains true to the Biblical story. An angel still appears to Mary, a 15-year-old girl, and tells her “HAIL, FULL OF GRACE.” In the Bible the angel begins by telling her not to be afraid. This poem explains her fear and terror. The angel is described as being a towering man, which would make his presence threatening to a young girl. However, her reaction shifts from fear and shock to anger and rage, “murderous rage” fairly quickly. As she tells it, she was “spinning flax,” and going “to the well for water.” She was just minding her own business when the entire course of her life was disrupted and altered in one fell swoop. She must bend to his will; what choice does she have in the matter? He is “a flat stone” unmoving and unbending in his mission, while she is a lily, fragile by comparison. The fact that she must bend as the lilies do represents a shift in reader expectations. Biblically, the lilies of the field do not toil; they trust in God. But here they bend under an “assault.” “I fell to my knees,” she says, “I salted / the ground before me.” She describes the

tears that fall from her face, her overwhelming sense of vulnerability and powerlessness, her submission to his will and power in this pivotal moment in her life. This is a new and different Mary:

He did not move, his voice  
had turned to thunder, there was  
no word to remember. but Womb  
He spoke to my womb.  
The fruit of my womb.  
Sunlight & thunder. I had not  
heard thunder before  
in such blinding light (102)

Because he is unmoving and his voice is like thunder, there is no way she can fight such a monstrous force, despite her own rage and her own desire to evade this responsibility. She has now become “Mother.” That is her new role, her new calling, though it is one she did not ask for or desire. It is a name that has been given to her, one she did not choose for herself. The angel now speaks “to [her] womb” instead of to her, making her almost a non-person, defined only by what she carries in her womb. Traditionally, Mary has in fact been defined by what (or whom) she carried in her womb, she has been defined as the mother of Christ. This resentment she feels is a new representation of that traditional portrait of the Virgin Mother. Magick has given her new life and a new voice. When the angel speaks to her womb, Mary hears thunder in “blinding light.” This is an illustration of one the characteristics of magical

realism in the poem, as the reader is suddenly forced to accept without question the ability that Mary possesses to *hear* light.

In Of Woman Born (1986), Adrienne Rich argues that there are two distinct meanings to the word motherhood. One is simply the power to give birth and have children and the other is an institution.

This institution has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems. It has withheld over one-half the human species from the decisions affecting their lives; it exonerates men from fatherhood in any authentic sense; it creates the dangerous schism between “private” and “public” life; it calcifies human choices and potentialities. In the most fundamental and bewildering of contradictions, it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them. At certain points in history, and in certain cultures, the idea of woman-as-mother has worked to endow all women with respect, even with awe, and to give women some say in the life of a people or a recorded history, motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities. (13)

The Virgin Mary in this poem feels the weight of this institution, to be sure. Mary, in her new incarnation, critiques this system, this institution. She has the perspective of one who truly feels as though she is viewed in “awe” and degraded at once. As we will see, she understands that she will be called “blessed” and she will be the object of praise and admiration, but she also became a mother without a choice and she will

continue to describe this experience as one where her hands are constantly tied, literally and figuratively.

The next section of the poem, “VISITATION: Elizabeth and Mary” keeps with the devotion of the “Seven Joys of the Virgin.” In the traditional story of the visitation, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist, and upon seeing her, the baby moves within Elizabeth’s womb. Traditionally, this is seen as recognition, even from one unborn, that the child Mary carries is worthy to be praised. In Loba, di Prima writes of the experience from Mary’s perspective. Mary says: “yr belly leaps and mine is still as stone” (104), which initially seems to reflect a lifelessness within her womb as it compares to the leaping child her cousin carries. However, the stillness of a stone is meant to carry solemnity; it has weight to it, as if she knows that she is literally called for something heavy and serious. She carries the burden of this child and this burden is as cumbersome and unmoving as a stone. Rich notes in Of Woman Born that a mother quite literally “bears the weight of Eve’s transgression” and because of this “she is expected to carry the burden of male salvation. [...] Certainly the mother serves the interests of patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience, and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions” (44-5). The imagery has reflected Mary’s state of mind: forces outside her control are cold, hard, and unmoving while she is forced to bend to the will of others. She has no choice in the matter. How does one reason with God? One must bend to His will. The Mary presented in Loba has been transformed from the Mary in the Bible, the one that says in Luke 1: 49 that God has

done “great things” for her, looking down on her “lowliness.” The new and reborn Mary sees her calling as a burden and an imposition.

In “NATIVITY,” Mary is not only reborn, but she speaks explicitly for di Prima herself, as this section of Loba mirrors di Prima’s own experiences giving birth for the first time. In Recollections of my Life as a Woman, di Prima tells of having no say in the process of giving birth to her child, of having all control stripped from her:

[...] I found myself being transferred onto a gurney and wheeled into the “delivery room”. There to my horror, various medieval degradations occurred. I had already gone through the required enema and shaving of my pubic hair (all routine in those primitive times), and hadn’t really thought the process could get much worse.

But now I found myself strapped onto the delivery table, my hands and arms strapped down, and my body in the most unlikely position possible for producing a child: my pelvis and legs were higher than my stomach, my legs tied to the stirrups of this contraption. Nevertheless, I was still with it, paying attention, and that in itself in this place seemed something of a triumph.

Even that was taken from me. As Jeanne crowned and just as I was about to push her out, an invisible demonic being standing somewhere behind my head forced a gas mask over my mouth. I twisted my head as far as I could to get it off, I held my breath (all while still trying to produce this infant). But to no avail. I finally did

have to breathe, and the mask being over my face, I did pass out. At that crucial moment I was not allowed to be Witness. (170)

She describes this experience as being the “ultimate violation” (170), and on some level, she shares this sense of violation with Mary in Loba, where Mary says:

[...] They fettered me  
 w/ leather straps, on delivery table. I cd not  
 cry out. Forced gas mask over mouth,  
 slave. I cd not  
 turn head [...]  
 I cd not  
 turn head, move hand, or leg  
 thus forced. They tore child from me. Whose? (107)

Again, these are emotions that Mary has not traditionally held in our culture. When Mary is magickally reborn, she vividly expresses her sense of anger and betrayal. She feels she has no control, that once again the institution that Rich describes in Of Woman Born has kept her under male power. She is strapped down and literally immobilized, adding injury to the insult of being pregnant against her will and without her consent.

She later notes that the infant was fed “sour / reluctant milk.” In many cultures it is believed that if a mother is filled with rage, sadness, or some other “unhealthy” emotion, her breast milk can poison her child. Mary has been unsure, angry, and bitter from the moment of the Annunciation. Now that she has given birth to this child, she

feels reluctance because she was forced into silence and complacency at the moment of birth. She is not allowed to move or feel the moment as it is happening to her. And further, in Mary's case, that final question of who the baby really belongs to looms over her head. She knows this child is not hers. He belongs to God and all of humanity. On some level, if Rich's assertions are correct and mothers do revive and renew the patriarchy by teaching and perpetuating the institution, then no child really belongs to its mother. Every mother gives her child to the machine, to the institution that maintains the imbalance in power.

The "Flight into Egypt" is next in Loba, which is the story in the book of Matthew where Joseph takes Mary and Jesus into Egypt to save the newborn. Joseph is warned in a dream that Herod plans to kill Jesus, so they leave to protect their child. In the Biblical version of the story, Mary's only concern is protecting her son. Di Prima departs from the traditional story in that the transformed Mary also has knowledge of Herod's plan to kill all the boys in Bethlehem. In this revisionist version, Mary now carries the weight of all those dead and dying children.

One almost senses Mary might be experiencing post-partum depression: "stone force. Stone heart. I move / boulders along this path" (109). Everything in her life from the annunciation on has been exhausting and futile, like trying to move boulders along a path. The men who had tied her down during the "Nativity" are now forcing her to flee into Egypt because they are trying to kill her child. She can hear the cries of "200 infants," presumably the children who are being put to death at the hands of their corrupt King, and she recognizes that each one of those 200 crying

children “might have been the Christ.” The fact that she was chosen for this journey, the fact that she received this unlikely calling, still baffles her. It could have been any one of those mothers and the Christ could have been any one of those dying children.

Her depression and confusion becomes further evident as she confesses “I do not know / which one I have carried away / on this aging burro” (109). This is connected to the powerlessness she felt in the “Nativity.” Strapped to a table, unable to move, unable to speak, she has no control over which child they give her to call her own. In fact, in di Prima’s own horrific experience giving birth to her daughter Jeanne, she says that when they eventually handed her the baby, as she was still strapped down, “all I could do was turn away and say bitterly, “I hope you’re going to give that poor thing a bath” (170). The voice of Mary, di Prima, and the Loba have almost become one.

“THE MARRIAGE AT CANA,” which is not traditionally a part of the Seven Joys of the Virgin Devotion, is next in the poem. Di Prima includes the Marriage at Cana in place of Pentecost, which would traditionally come next in the devotion. The Marriage at Cana is a very well known story, though. According to the Book of John, Jesus attends a wedding at Cana and the hosts run out of wine. Mary reports this to Jesus who performs the miracle of then turning water into wine. This miracle is only mentioned in one brief line in di Prima’s poem. Instead, di Prima’s revised version of this story focuses on the institution of marriage. The Biblical version places emphasis on Mary’s pride in her son; this is his story above all else. Di

Prima's version casts Mary as the protagonist of the story. She is not just the mother of Christ here; she is a woman with opinions about existing social structures:

window  
 it is  
 window        on pain  
               where the moon was  
 bitter window on  
               lees the splash  
 a sea  
 of certain dregs,        old sorrow  
 under yr house  
               splashing like waves  
 that wind drives  
               to harbor  
 crook of haven  
               full of stillness  
               wine or water  
               thick as lead  
               in that  
               moon's shadow (112)

The window is the first image we see, and we can assume the window here represents a clear view into her soul, her psyche. None of the words are capitalized in this short

section of Loba. None of them are set apart as being more important than any other word. They are the same: “wine or water / thick as lead.” We can see through the window that beneath her house are crashing waves and “dregs” from old sorrows. The window serves as a barrier or shield from these waves, the window “lees the splash,” but the splashing and the dregs beneath the house are still visible. That these images are at the center of the “Marriage” is important, because here is another institution of the patriarchy that is built on illusion, one that women are expected to carry on and perpetuate. The house may appear sturdy, but it rests on “old sorrows” and bitterness. This reflects Mary’s views on another “institution” that perpetuates patriarchal systems of oppression: the institution of marriage. This may not be Mary’s marriage, but di Prima includes this event in Mary’s life in “The Seven Joys” to give Mary a chance to voice her opinion on the subject, breathing new life and an unseen point of view into once dead stories and myths.

The marriage, the house, the entire celebration, from Mary’s point of view, is a window looking in on pain. The “sorrow / under yr house,” the sorrow just beneath the surface of the celebration, “splash[es] like waves” (112). Whether the guests are served wine or water is insignificant. They are still witness to a sham. If earlier the Loba is described as honoring her “moon sisters,” it is significant that now Mary reflects on an event that takes place in the “moon’s shadow.” This event isn’t intended to praise or uplift women the way the opening incantation of Loba did. This event takes place in the moon’s shadow. Marriage is characterized by “stillness.” She can see waves splashing through windows, but she is “full of stillness.” This

institution carries the same weight as other patriarchal institutions have throughout The Seven Joys—“thick as lead.”

By the time we get to “RESURRECTION,” Mary admits to now being the “towering” presence she once “feared / in human girlhood” (115). In the resurrection we see Mary coming into herself. Jack Foley says of Loba that it is grounded in loss and recovery, and that it presents a “vision of metamorphosis.” The poem, like its speaker is ever changing. Mary experiences her own transformation in “RESURRECTION.” She has experienced fear, uncertainty, anger, and depression. Now she finds strength, and we see her “laughing in frail sun” (115). No longer willing to suffer under the weight of her burdens, she now “dances” instead. Traditionally, resurrection refers to Jesus Christ. This new resurrection is all about Mary.

“RESURRECTION” is also rich with the kind of tension we’ve seen throughout Loba. The tension is in opposing forces colliding. We see, for example, that she both “do[es] not touch him” and yet she “cannot avoid his touch” (116). We see that she is “burnt to powder” –by the very sun that she calls “frail” (115), and yet she is “no longer burnt / but burning” (116). The burning that she now experiences is a burning passion. She has found herself and now she will not be stopped. “I leap / thru flaming hoop” (116) she says at last. She does what she wants now. There has been a shift. She has risen

“CORONATION” is the last of the Seven Joys. The seven joys are based on canonical events in the life of the Virgin Mary and this final event is her coronation in

heaven after her death. Christ places a crown on his mother's head. In some depictions of the event, He is accompanied by God the Father and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Once again, just as Mary has begun to experience freedom, weightlessness, and dancing, the *weight* of her new role is emphasized in di Prima's version of the coronation. "[I]mplacable son," Mary says, "sets weight of metal / on my immaterial head" (117). She is given this crown not because of anything she has done, but because she is his mother. This is yet another weight she did not ask for, another role she did not choose. A coronation is a ceremony where one is given a place of honor, given a divine place and a position of power, but still "under God." Her son places this heavy crown on her head, and so in the final power struggle between Mary and the men who would try to control her, it appears the men have finally weighed her down.

She later says that the "pain of wings is nothing / to the crown / which presses on my 3<sup>rd</sup> eye" (117). Here again we have competing religions presenting their own competing realities, and in this magically real domain, we as readers exist somewhere in the middle of these competing realities. The Virgin Mary is speaking of the weight of the crown placed on her head by Jesus Christ in a disparaging manner. This is a continuation of the sort of surprising assertions and thoughts that have come from The Virgin Mother. One doesn't expect her anger in the "ANNUNCIATION" and we don't expect her to refer to Christ as her "implacable" son in the "CORONATION." She can't just be left alone. She then says this crown presses on her third eye, which is an esoteric concept meaning an inner eye, or a gateway to deeper spirituality. In

Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the third eye is known as the eye to enlightenment. In fact, in a lot of Indian and East Asian iconography, the third eye is denoted with a dot, jewel, or mark on the foreheads of those who have achieved or are seeking enlightenment. The fact that di Prima has such an iconic Christian figure complaining about anything interfering with her third eye, much less a crown placed on her head by Jesus Christ, is a jarring concept. Here Mary is critiquing and resisting hegemonic religious constructs, even as they are placed on her by her son. The crown has become a prison, not allowing her to see her full potential, her authentic self, or her deeper spirituality.

Mary later says that she lacks “even the grace of that girl / who bent to angels,” implying that in her coronation, she has regressed somehow. The way she has regressed is in the way she has been portrayed, the way we view her as a culture. Like Helen, Lilith, and Persephone, whose stories we have seen earlier in Loba, Mary has been given an identity rather than being allowed to construct her own. She has been reduced to paint on a canvas or a statue in a church courtyard:

in his little church the rock  
                                   on which I founder  
 while the stars rush outward  
                                   to darkness, must I  
 remain still? (117)

Stillness returns to Mary’s life, once again, against her will. And now that she has become an icon and an image rather than a person, she feels powerless once again:

“They eat my joy, my heart” she says of the “ruthless” masses who literally and figuratively “devour saviors” (118). Here she speaks to her feeling of being objectified and consumed by gluttonous and ruthless masses. Just as they would reduce Helen to a portrait on a wall, they would reduce Mary to her image, removing from her the humanity, her “joy” and her “heart” which they eat and devour just as they would eat the Eucharist, the body of Christ. But just as Helen finds strength in being able to speak for herself and define her own identity as being apart from the images created for her, Mary too finds power in telling her story and creating her new self.

In the end, Mary’s voice breaks through the images and names created for her once more:

[...] O, I shall burst

Burst thru

Take now

milke of the stars

& rub it in my flesh

Like Sabbath ointment

I will fly (119)

It is too simplistic to say that the women all “triumph” in Loba. Persephone still has to spend much of her time in Hades, Helen is still blamed for war, and Lilith is still marred by her fierce and rebellious reputation. Similarly, Mary still wears her heavy

crown. But in Loba, these women have been transformed. They are more than types. They are more than the Virgin and the whore, the witch and the beauty. Mary has “burst through” the image that has been given to her; she has shattered the names that have been attributed to her. She is more than a virgin and more than a mother; she is a woman with a story to tell.

“The Seven Joys” are presented in the correct order in Loba, but they are not presented without interruption. “The Poet, Seeking Her” interrupts the flow of “The Seven Joys,” allowing the reader to get a glimpse into the poet’s process of trying to magickally re-imagine and re-cover Mary. The poet wonders what Mary must have thought about, what went through her mind through each of these pivotal stages in her life. The poet asks such questions as, “*Did she sit all day on that donkey*” and “*Did she smile calmly, did she smile / at all*” (111). She even wonders if Mary “baked” or “sewed,” if she ever had more children, and if she ever dreamed. Clearly, the poet, in “Seeking Her” wants to avoid the pitfalls and inaccuracies of those who have portrayed Mary in the past. She is not a “type” and she was not always a “saint.” She was once a person. In giving Mary many of her own experiences, di Prima attempts to make Mary’s story both unique and universal. Not everyone gave birth to the Christ, but many can share the same fears and many have experienced the same sense of powerlessness. In fact, Mary carries the cross and burden shared by others.

In book one of Loba, one that describes different women who have been sung back to life, one such seemingly ordinary woman is reflected in the Virgin Mary. She “bends, eternally, at tables / at wood tables in factories, fashioning / crosses of silver”

(12). The fact that she bends eternally at these tables tells the reader that her work never ceases. Others wear beautiful crosses for adornment and as fashion statements because of the woman who fashions them. This is her cross to bear. “[W]ill you meet / her eyes” the Loba asks of her readers, when “she raises / her head...” (12). Will we notice those who have gone unnoticed? Will we listen to those who have been silenced? The deeper question, it seems, relates to the existing social structures that keep this woman silently fashioning jewelry while others benefit from her labor. This poem asks us to magickally envision and thus ideally create a world where women don’t succeed at the expense of others.

“‘The Ruses’ A Coyote Tale” is another short poem that interrupts “The Seven Joys” and it speaks to the hardships of being trapped in the system, in the institution, and the choices as they exist for one who has been trapped:

Sometimes you take up the trap &  
run with the metal between yr teeth

At times it is better to chew off  
your leg.

You have in this case to consider  
the trail of blood.

Sometimes for weeks it is better  
not to eat, the meat is poisoned, but  
you wait it out

knowing the creatures are not

consistent, they forget. Or they will  
 move on. It is hard to explain this  
 to the cubs. (110)

Here di Prima literally uses animal imagery to speak to the hardships these women face. She faces the choice of remaining trapped or of chewing off her own leg. She can remain imprisoned within the system or she can face the pain that escaping would cause. We've seen her use this kind of animal imagery before with Lilith and with several of the other "nameless women" in Book One of Loba. This isn't the only time in "The Seven Joys" where animal imagery is prevalent. In "RESURRECTION," for example, Mary is described as a "crouching beast" who seeks to "devour /this wraith as I chewed / sinew & bone" (116). This conflation of woman and wolf that happens periodically throughout Loba is not an accident. As Estés points out in Women Who Run with Wolves: "Healthy wolves and healthy women share certain psychic characteristics: keen sensing, playful spirit, and a heightened capacity for devotion [...] they are experienced in adapting to constantly changing circumstances; they are fiercely stalwart and very brave" (2). Both wolves and women have also been historically hounded and maligned for being overly aggressive or dangerous. They have both been "targets of those who would clean up the wilds as well as the wildish environs of the psyche, extinguishing the instinctual, and leaving no trace of it behind. The predation of wolves and women by those who misunderstand them is strikingly similar" (2).

From a feminist perspective, this notion of “woman as wolf” is a little problematic. One could argue that it essentializes femininity and it constructs womanhood as animalistic and primal. However, once again, di Prima is trying to speak in the “mother tongue” in this text, in a voice that comes from a place outside of patriarchal constructions, as she magickally recreates and revises patriarchal myths, legends, and stories. As Mary Russo argues in The Female Grotesque, if the grotesque is partially defined as something that visibly and obviously deviates from “the norm,” and maleness is constructed as the norm, then femaleness is almost always going to be constructed as “grotesque.” Di Prima does not use animal imagery as a means to conjure the grotesque here, though. It is meant to be a magickal image of raw power and strength. The Loba is a positive image, one that is life-affirming, bringing the dead back to life.

In Recollections of My Life as Woman, di Prima says that her memories of what it meant to be a woman came from her grandmother:

In the turbulent 1930’s into which I was born, my grandmother taught me that the things of woman go on: that they are the very basis and ground of human life. Babies are born and raised, the food is cooked. The world is cleaned and mended and kept in order. Kept sane. That one could live with dignity and joy even in poverty. That even tragedy and shock and loss require this basis of loving attendance.

And men were peripheral to all this. They were dear, they brought excitement, they sought to bring change. Printed newspapers,

made speeches, tried to bring the taste of sanity and order into the larger world. But they were fragile somehow. In their excitement they would forget to watch the clock and turn the oven off. I grew up thinking them a luxury. (3)

Di Prima's memoir paints a clear picture of how she grew up seeing and interpreting gender and gender performance. As opposed to Elise Cowen's poem "The Lady is a humble thing," which emphasizes that in Cowen's world, women were used "for border," in di Prima's world, the women were at the center of life. They were the backbones of her universe. The men were the ones who were a "luxury," who were "for border." The interesting thing about the women di Prima draws for us in Loba is that they reflect this basic ideology of what it means to be a woman, this ideology that is so pervasive in her memoir. They are the "ground and basis for human life." The women she presents in Part 5 of Loba, Helen, Lilith, and Persephone, for example, have historically only been presented in broken pieces, as types of women, as the witch, the temptress, the virgin, and the whore. But just as Anzaldúa insists that women who have been called broken or splintered learn to embrace a *mestiza* consciousness, so does di Prima. She mixes memory and folklore to find a reality where, magickally, willfully, broken pieces become whole. Still, paradoxically, while creating wholeness, Loba also recognizes brokenness, in an open and honest fashion.

**Vidal:** *Puede retirarse Garcés—y llévese a los hombres. Que descansen. Que descansen bien.*

**Garcés:** *¿Está usted seguro, señor?*

**Vidal:** *Por el amor de Dios. No es más que una mujer.*

*Mercedes: Eso es lo que pensó usted siempre. Por eso pude estar cerca—porque yo era invisible para usted.*<sup>41</sup>

Speaking empowers. *Howling* empowers. At the core of the “magick” that runs di Prima’s life, both in her poetry and in her memoir, is the idea that we can willfully manipulate the universe and speak ourselves into existence. Indeed, in Western tradition, the world was created through the power of the spoken word. God said “Let there be light” and there was light. Words have the ability to create and destroy worlds. The final word in Loba belongs to Persephone, as she howls in pain and strength<sup>42</sup>, legitimizing her experience, giving value to her point of view.

one “life” is not more real than the other  
 not in “deflowering” do we come  
 into bloom; we have been always  
  
 there at the fluid boundary of Hades  
 we spring continuously into life & death  
 this is the province of the co-emergent mother  
 this is the daughter, sixteen, wrathful & ready  
  
 nor is the daughter separate from the mother  
  
 fruit within fruit; a sweetness

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<sup>41</sup> **Vidal:** You can leave, Garcés.

**Garcés:** You’re sure, Captain?

**Vidal:** For God’s sake, she’s just a woman.

**Mercedes:** That’s what you always thought. That’s why I was able to get away with it. I was invisible to you.

<sup>42</sup> “Persephone: Reprise” is the final piece as Loba exists as of its latest publication. But *Loba* is an ongoing work that is always, as they say, in progress.

known only at the source where the fountain

divides

becomes itself

where fruit & seed & flower dance equally

exchanging shapes    exchanging essences

there is no knife can sever me from her

where I go down to bleed, to birth, to die (314)

The imagery here is complex. On the one hand, Persephone seems to be linking herself to every woman. She uses the pronoun “we,” making it clear that she speaks not only for herself. She makes it clear that a woman is more than her sexuality—“not in ‘deflowering’ do we come / into bloom”—, but that she has always been “in bloom,” beautiful and fragrant and valuable. She doesn’t become a woman when she is “deflowered” but rather her womanhood is always a part of her; it cannot be severed from her.

There is power in the magick of being able to “exchange” shapes and essences. The Loba can carry Persephone’s burden, can give her strength to carry on. The strength and power that is exchanged in the text is subtle, and the language here is foreign to many: *it is* the mother tongue. In giving the once dead and voiceless women represented in Loba the power to speak, di Prima encourages her reader to do the same. The strength that is passed on in Loba is like Mercedes’s strength in Pan’s Labyrinth. It is dangerous because it is not visible except to those with the eyes to see it. Vidal does not see Mercedes’s strength because she is a woman. He does not see

Ofelia's strength because she is a child. Yet all of these are examples of strength and fierce determination.

V. Conclusion: The Honored Life

**Fauno:** ¿Sacrificareis vuestro derecho sagrado – por este mocoso al que apenas conocéis?

**Ofelia:** Si. Lo sacrifico.<sup>43</sup>



In Lonesome Traveler, Kerouac ends his essay “Mexico Fellaheen” with a tone that resonates with his conclusion to Dr. Sax, as well as the ending of Pan’s Labyrinth:

Ahead is the Altar, the Virgin Mary is white in a field of blue-and-white-and-golden arrangements—it’s too far to see adequately, I promise myself to go forward to the altar as soon as some of the people leave.

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<sup>43</sup> Faun: You would give up your sacred rights for this brat you barely know?  
Ofelia: Yes, I would.

—The people are all women, young and old, and suddenly here come two children in rags and blankets and barefooted walking slowly down the right hand aisle with the big boy laying his hand anxiously holding something on his little brother's head, I wonder why—they're both barefooted but I hear the clack of heels, I wonder why—they go forward to the altar, come around the side to the glass coffin of a saint statue, all the time walking slowly, anxiously, touching everything, looking up, crawling infinitesimally around the church and taking it all in completely.—At the coffin a littler boy (3 years old) touches the glass and goes around to the foot of the dead and touches glass and I think “They understand death, they stand there in the church under the skies that have a beginningless past and go into the never-ending future, waiting themselves for death, at the foot of the dead, in a holy temple.” – [...] Anxiously I watch them leave, to my amaze I see a little tiny girl one foot or and-a-half high, two years old, or one-and-a-half, waddling tinily lowly beneath them, a meek little lamb on the floor of the church, Anxiousness of big brother was to hold a shawl over her head, he wanted little brother to hold *his* end, between them and under the canopy marched Princess Sweetheart examining the church with her big brown eyes, her little heels clacking.

As soon as they're outside, they play with the other children. Many children are playing in the garden-enclosed entryway, some of

them are standing and staring at the front of the church at images of angels in rain dimmed stone.

I bow to all this, kneel at my pew entryway, and go out, taking one last look at St. Antoine de Padue (St. Anthony) Santo Antonio de Padua.—Everything is perfect on the street again, the world is permeated with roses of happiness all the time, but none of us know it. The happiness consists in realizing that all is a great strange dream.  
(35-6)

Kerouac promises himself at the beginning of the passage that he is going to approach the altar of this church, but by the end of the essay, he instead bows to “all this:” the children playing outside the doors of the church, and the world “permeated with roses of happiness.” He rejects traditional constructs of worship and religion and instead embraces a non-traditional form of spirituality, a celebration of children and the knowledge and beauty they possess. They are curious; they “touch everything,” even death. They do not fear the statues of the saints because they are sacred; the children embrace them because they are sacred.

One of the most interesting statements Kerouac makes in the above passage is that children “understand” death. Perhaps it is because the little boy approaches the “glass coffin” with no fear or hesitation that Kerouac makes this odd observation. Perhaps it has something to do with children being so close to birth that they can fully comprehend death, even wait for it, understanding this life as nothing but a “strange dream.” Kerouac seems enthralled by the wisdom he sees in these children. He sees in

the little girl with loud clacking heels what the faun recognized in Ofelia. He sees her as a Princess. He bows to the whole scene just as the faun bows before Ofelia at the end of Pan's Labyrinth. And the roses that permeate the world at the end of "Mexico Fellaheen" mirror the optimism we see when Jackie stops to put roses in his hair as he walks home at the end of Dr. Sax. And just as Dr. Sax presents the idea that "Dream and memory are intermixed in this mad universe," the lesson in "Mexico Fellaheen" is that "happiness consists in realizing that all is a great strange dream."

On Kerouac's gravestone are the words "He Honored Life." In Kerouac, The Word and the Way, Ben Giamo argues that for Kerouac, "the mundane and existential burden of being in time prompted metaphysical preoccupations and incited a spiritual desire to transcend (or sidestep) both the calendar and the clock" (197). In attempting to escape the burdens of chronology, Kerouac hoped to "restore a state of lost bliss through belief in either a Christian afterlife (where one is saved from sin and hell) or the holy Buddhist void (delivered at last from karma and rebirth)" (197). In a sense, this is only partially true. Yes, Kerouac lived his life recognizing that this life is only temporary, recognizing that this life is merely a strange dream from which we are eventually bound to awaken in death, whether that death means an awakening into a Christian afterlife, a Buddhist void, or some other possibility. But Kerouac, Cowen, and di Prima also demonstrate in their writing a particular awareness of this life being sacred and holy. They demonstrate an awareness of the things in this life which others cannot see, the magical, the grotesque, and the unbelievable.

In each of the texts explored in this dissertation, the characters and speakers experience selfhood; they learn about themselves, discovering who they are and who they hope to be. In Dr. Sax, Jacky transitions from innocence to maturity. Chronologically, he may still be young, but he has matured by the end of the novel. Our adult narrator looks back and recognizes the moments in his childhood that defined his character and led him into adulthood. He sees his childhood literally washed away in a tragic and terrible flood, but in the end, he can still see magic; he can still see Dr. Sax. He hasn't lost the imaginative ability to recognize elements of magic within his difficult reality. In Elise Cowen's poems, she discovers who she is in relation to the world around her. What she discovers, though, is that the person she is expected to be—"The Lady" she is expected to be—is at odds with the person she knows herself to be. As she grows and experiences a discovery of self, she finds the grotesque and oppressive nature of her reality to be too painful and stifling, and so she chooses to determine her own fate and end her life. The women in di Prima's Loba are at varying stages of growth and personal development throughout the poem, but they are each rediscovering themselves, learning who they are, choosing to name themselves, and reconciling the broken pieces of their identities. The Loba has brought them back to life, and now they can learn to envision and magickally create whole and complete selves.

In the ever-present war against the imagination, the characters and speakers represented in this dissertation grow and mature, but they never lose their childlike faith; they never lose the imaginative ability to see things in their worlds that others

are blind to. Their realities may be dark, sad, scary and often completely at odds with them, but these characters and speakers have the strength to shape their own fates and determine their own identities.

One of the things I have discovered in my research as I was working on this project is the place magical realism holds as a tool for rebelling against reality, or for holding a mirror to reality and to show how absurd it really is. I learned that magic is a way for writers who exist outside of the privileged center of western literature to access that main body of literature. Magical realist texts may appropriate western languages or genres, but through the use of magic, ancient religions, mythologies, and local lore, they turn these genres on their figurative heads. Earlier in this dissertation, I discussed the possibility of reading the Beat Generation's use of magical realism as an example of the dominant culture exploiting a mode of expression used by those outside of that culture. The Beat Generation, though, cannot and should not be seen as a part of the dominant culture. These works are on the fringes; they stand outside the privileged center.

Even though On the Road and The Dharma Bums are widely read and much loved novels, they are loved in popular circles, but they are still not as widely regarded or acknowledged in academic circles. Truman Capote famously said of Kerouac's work, for example that it was not writing, it was *typewriting*. That attitude has lingered. Bruce Bawer said this of the Beat Generation (specifically of how Corso, Ginsberg, and McClure defined the Beat Generation) in his 1992 New Criterion review of The Portable Beat Reader:

Reading such slovenly, overheated prose [...] one hardly knows which is more astonishing: that these men and their cohorts could ever have acquired significant literary reputations in the first place, or that, more than thirty years later, when many of their far more gifted contemporaries are virtually forgotten, every last member of the Beat fraternity who ever picked up a pencil (or, in the case of Neal Cassady, stole a typewriter) has been accorded an honored place in the history of American letters.

I disagree with Mr. Bawer. On the Road has continued to appeal to a particular demographic, to be sure. It is a story that has continuously attracted dissatisfied adolescents: those who want something more out of life, those with a romantic inclination to turn their backs on society and hit the road. And because of its seemingly undying appeal to rebellious youth, “American letters” largely look down on the Beats as writers who rambled, who were “frenzied and ungrammatical,” and whose only literary contribution is to unhappy 18-year-old boys. In this sense, Beat writers *are* on the fringes. They are unfairly regarded as popular, but unworthy of academic attention. This dissertation is my humble contribution in *righting* that wrong.

Further, all the Beat Generation texts specifically explored in this dissertation are, in fact, very much on the fringes. Kerouac may be arguably the most “privileged” of the writers discussed here, but Dr. Sax does not get the attention, scholarly or otherwise, that it should. In 2003, Doctor Sax and the Great World Snake, a

screenplay Kerouac had written based on Dr. Sax, was published. This screenplay has not been made into a film (yet?), but was released with an accompanying audio-performance that harkens back to the radio programming of Kerouac's childhood. Dr. Sax was clearly a project that Kerouac held dear. It's his memoir, the story of his childhood and his growth into adulthood, and he even wrote it in more than one genre—novel and screenplay. But it's a story that Kerouac's audience, both popular and scholarly, has not embraced as much as novels like On the Road and The Dharma Bums. As Jim Sampas said in his introduction to the 2003 screenplay, in response to such a bizarre novel as Dr. Sax, Kerouac's audience felt “confused. Why had the master of the road narratives created such a strange work? Dr. Sax was a crossbreed—childhood memoir and prose noir—and a dark apocalyptic vision. Where were the kicks?” (1). In short, Dr. Sax often gets lost among Kerouac's other tales of more adult adventures—or *kicks*. But it's a complex and compelling novel, and it's a story that Kerouac himself kept coming back to.

This dissertation is my call to action as well, saying that Kerouac scholars need to revisit this odd and mysterious novel. There is more to be said about it. For example, while much has been written about Kerouac's writing style in relation to texts like The Subterraneans, where his writing is clearly influenced by jazz and his emerging “spontaneous prose” method, similar attention has yet to be paid to his style in Dr. Sax. With the recent text and audio recording of Kerouac's Dr. Sax screenplay, there is certainly room to examine the way music and sound influence his writing,

especially since Dr. Sax is such an aural novel, partially influenced as it was by programs from the golden age of radio.

As opposed to Kerouac who is the most “central” of the writers covered in this dissertation, Elise Cowen is perhaps more on the fringes than any other writer of the Beat Generation. A couple of her poems were published posthumously thanks to Cowen’s friend Leo Skir, and a few more have made their way into the two anthologies dedicated to women of the Beat Generation (Brenda Knight’s Women of the Beat Generation and Richard Peabody’s A Different Beat), but the majority of her poems remain unpublished. And while in the 1999 Rolling Stone Book of the Beats Joyce Johnson claimed:

The subject of Beat women is currently rather fashionable. Two anthologies of women’s writings have recently been published, and I keep hearing about scholars who are working on papers. There is particular attention paid to Elise Cowen, but too much of it is morbidly centered upon her suicide, as if she is the prime victim even the admirers of Beat women have been looking for. (48),

I still wonder if enough attention has been paid to Cowen, morbid or otherwise.

Where are these papers Johnson kept hearing about in 1999? Where is all the scholarship on this “rather fashionable” subject? Tony Trigilio wrote “Who writes? Reading Elise Cowen’s Poetry” for the book Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing in the Beat Generation, but outside of this, searches for scholarship on Cowen, her life or her poetry, seem futile. Johnson, Leo Skir, and Allen Ginsberg all helped keep

her memory alive, but more needs to be written, more serious critical study needs to be done. The first step in this direction, it seems to me, would be to get more of her poetry published. There has been talk of a book, and I am optimistic for its release. A collection of Cowen's work would provide a much-needed contribution and fill a very real void in Beat literature and scholarship.

Finally, Loba is a text that is so rich with texture that this dissertation only begins to scratch the surface of its meaning. Magick is but one lens through which one could read Loba. It is only one small piece of an expansive puzzle that, quite frankly, needs to be played with—this is a puzzle that could never really be solved, but it should be discussed, analyzed, and thought about further. One of the seeds this dissertation has planted in my mind and heart is a desire to dig deeper into Loba. The chapter that explores magick as an offshoot on magical realist themes is a beginning, but there are so many levels to this poem that a book project is really in order. As I was working on Loba, I thought more than once that *someone* should dig into all the literary and cultural allusions in the poem. *Somebody* really should explicate this work. This dissertation may be the springboard for a more extensive look at this poem, which also has not gotten as much critical attention as it should.

What I hope readers will get from this study— besides new looks at magical realism—is that each of these writers really did honor life, and in some ways they asked their readers to do the same. Diane di Prima's life and writing are inspirational. In Loba, she honors not only her life, but the lives of all women, real and imaginary, asking us not only to see the women around us and to pay attention to their stories,

but to see ourselves in these women. The Loba sings life into once dead creatures. She honors life. Loba tells not only di Prima's story, but she speaks for all of us. And given that Loba's author and creator achieved and accomplished much, as a writer, an activist, and a woman, it's easy to see how she too honors life.

When it comes to Cowen and Kerouac, though, this may be more difficult to see. It seems strange to assert that a woman who committed suicide at the age of 28 and man who essentially drank himself to death at the age of 47 both *honored* life. But these writers both felt their life stories were worth telling, and they each told their stories in their unorthodox memoirs: Dr. Sax and Elise Cowen's poems tell the stories of their lives, the magical and grotesque mixed with the mundane. That is the beauty of writing one's life. Recounting one's experiences is a way of elevating those experiences. Cowen may have told Johnson that her writing was *mediocre*, but in writing her life, she honored her life. Writing her story also served as a way to illuminate the injustices present in her experiences, asking readers to sympathize and empathize, to recognize that injustice exists. Of course, a novel like Dr. Sax also asks that we recognize and believe in the existence of magic. The words on Kerouac's tombstone speak volumes about his life. One gets the sense that Sal Paradise said it best when he said at the beginning of On the Road that "the things that were to come were too fantastic not to tell" (9).

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